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MAUDE ANNESLEY.

MISS KING'S PROFESSION

BY

E. M. CHANNON


(MRS FRANCIS CHANNON)

AUTHOR OF

"CATO'S DAUGHTER," "THE REAL MRS HOLVER,"
ETC.

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Miss King's Profession

PRELUDE

THE long white road lay like a ribbon over the close-cropped turf of the Downs. A shimmering haze of heat hung over it ; and the sky was of a dazzling molten bluish-white. From the top of the rolling hill in front a little hot wind came sweeping down in gusts, raising the dust before it in miniature whirlwinds. A very young man, walking alone in a weary and footsore manner, was debating seriously within himself whether a walking tour was not the most detestable form of exercise in the world.

He had passed through a little country town, some half-mile back, and had thought shame of himself for wanting to finish his day's stage there, while the sun was yet so high, and the sea-coast town, where he proposed to spend the night, was not more than four miles distant ; but even the brief intervening space of time had taken all the pride out of him. The wind and the dust, the heat-haze and the glare, all seemed to him to

combine into a perfect whole of discomfort ; for, being no prophet, he did not know how much worse off he would have been in ten years' time, after the advent of the shrieking, malodorous, dust-scattering motor. Only a very small inducement would have made him put his pride in his pocket, and turn back to the decent little inn in the High Street. He was glad enough to compromise with his conscience, when the road dipped suddenly, and a little thicket of close-grown trees appeared by the side of it. He pushed open a gate, followed a winding path for a little way, and dropped upon cool grass, in the shade and out of the wind, with a sigh of relief.

It was a dingle such as Borrow would have loved : long grass, close-growing trees, a little path leading downward to some unseen place where a cool tinkling of water made itself heard in the summer silence—the most soothing sound in nature. Since the young man was very hot and tired, and in no particular hurry, and his own master in the matter of time, he succumbed without a struggle to the restful spell. His face in the delicious coolness of the grass, he slept soundly.

Now, the scratching of a mouse will disturb the profoundest slumber ; and so, in the depths of dreamland, he became presently aware of a faint, mouse-like sound beside him. He stirred, raised

his head, opened his drowsy eyes ; and the sound, curiously, was followed by a quick rustle like the folding of paper. A girl-child sat beside him, seriously observant of him, a little doubtful whether to fly or to hold her ground.

"Hallo !" said he.

"Hallo !" said she, in a clear little voice.

"What are you doing ?" said he.

"Writing," said she. She had a long black twopenny reporter's notebook on her knee, and a pencil in her hand ; and the origin of the mouse-like scratching became plain.

They looked at each other carefully. She was a slim, upright child, holding her head high—the sort of child who is always called tall for her age, whatever it may be. His ideas respecting this were entirely vague, for he was a young man without sisters ; but he saw that her skirts were still very short, showing a generous measure of long black legs. She had a mane of thick, straight, dark-brown hair, brushed back from her face like the pictures of Alice in Wonderland, and kept in place by a tortoiseshell comb stretching over her head from one ear to the other. Her face might have been called pale if it had not been so sun-burnt ; her hands, which were long and slim, were burnt many shades darker still. Her large eyes were of the colour and clearness of a pool of bog-water. She wore a straight holland frock, trimmed with narrow white braid.

For her part, she found herself looking at a young man with very dusty boots. His age was a negligible quantity—he was a grown-up. He had a sallow, thin face, and dark hair that curled a little. He had a trick of looking down; when he raised his eyes, as he had at his first surprised sight of her, they were of an extraordinarily vivid blue. On the whole, she approved of him. He had not poked fun at her, in the objectionable manner of the facetious uncles of this world; he had not patronised her; he had not asked what she was writing. Therefore, with truly feminine logic, she told him unasked.

“I am writing a story.”

He expressed a very proper surprise and interest.

“When I am grown up, I shall write books,” she told him firmly.

“Oh! You’ve settled already how to make your fortune?” His eyes twinkled at her for a moment, very bright blue between thick dark lashes.

“People don’t write books to make a fortune,” said she, voicing a much deeper truth than she knew. “They write because they like to.”

“Oh! that’s it, is it?” said he. He pulled a stalk of grass and bit it; and, seeing him thus properly abashed, she relented again.

“This is a new story that I’ve just begun.” She fluttered the leaves of her book. “Would you like to hear it?”

"Enormously!" He rolled over on his face, and lay looking down the cool, steep, green slope of the dingle, to where the little invisible stream tinkled below.

She was not shy. She opened her notebook and began to read, stopping here and there to frown a little over the pencilled scrawl, where her invention had outrun her fingers. After one or two suspicious glances at him, she satisfied herself that he was not imposing on her in the scandalously guileful fashion of many grown-ups, who feign an interest that they are obviously far from feeling. He was really listening with attention. It is, of course, attractive to the least self-centred of mankind to find himself the hero of even the most rudimentary history. The sleeping knight in the forest was recognisable, even though he had black hair and eyes and coal-black armour; so was the princess who discovered him, in spite of her cunning disguise of curling golden hair and eyes blue as the sky.

"The knight's boots were dusty, for he had ridden far.—That's all, so far," said she, shutting her book abruptly, quite unaware of her tell-tale glance at his feet.

"Thank you," said he politely. "I was very much interested indeed.—It isn't a fairy-tale, is it?"

"No!" said she with indignation. "I am too old for fairy-tales!"

"I beg your pardon," he murmured, looking

down the slope in front of him. "Of course, real life is much more interesting. Sir Walter is bad to beat, isn't he?"

"How did you know that I liked him so much?" said she, opening her eyes at him.

"I—recognised the style," said he: not confessing to a romance of his own early youth, whole pages of which had been lifted brazenly from *Ivanhoe*.

"Did you really?" said she, flushing with pleasure under her sunburn.

"Really," said he, with sincerity.

He lay biting grass and staring down the dingle.

"Shall I tell you a story now?" he said. "Not a fairy-tale—nor anything like Scott either, I'm afraid."

"Please," said she. She shook out her straight holland skirt, and disposed herself to listen with a little air of criticism.

His story did not run so fluently as hers—at any rate, in its beginning, which was dull: the story of a modern boy. The critical brown eyes held very scant approval; the listener's firm little mouth was closed sternly. But, not looking at her, and warming to his work, he presently was fairly launched upon what proved to be a very good story indeed. The uninteresting boy-hero became a living personality: his solitary childhood, his uncongenial school-life, his determined and

unaided struggle to make his own way in the world, all were painted as vividly as the people with whom he came in contact. The listener, forgetting her attitude of critic, listened breathlessly. Parts of the story were perhaps above her head ; but that often proves a mystic additional attraction to childhood. The dingle was very still ; the tinkling of the unseen brook provided only an undercurrent of sound to the steady voice of the story-teller. The listener sat as if mesmerised, her large eyes intent.

There came suddenly an alien sound into the cool stillness—a faint sound of wheels, a little creaking, a distant voice murmuring and crooning in a half-song. Then, breaking off, it called aloud : “Nell ! Nell ! Nell—a ! ”

The listening child started. The story-teller stopped suddenly.

“Go on ! ” she said imperiously. “What happened then ? ”

“I—don’t know.” He passed his hand over his forehead with an odd look.

“But what became of him ? I want to know ! ” she persisted.

“So do I.” He looked at her, and laughed. “But it’s gone—like the vision of Kubla Khan.”

“That’s poetry. Sarah knows it by heart,” said she uncompromisingly.

“Is that—Sarah ? ” He nodded in the direction of the voice that had called.

black hair, cropped close to her head like a boy's. Casting one *farouche* glance at him, she leaped out of his path and fled away through the tangle of grass and trees, calling aloud, like Milly, the mother of dolls : "Nell ! Nell ! Nell—a !"

The young man, climbing a fence, meditated idly on the name, its owner, its probable derivation.

"Greek Helen ? Too dark. Victorian Ellen ? Too modern. Eleanor ?—um—not quite——"

The blinding heat and dazzle of the afternoon sun struck him across the face. He stepped out once more on the dusty road.

CHAPTER I

THE PRIZE-GIVING

ST PHILIP'S SCHOOL—for the Daughters of Professional Men—was *en fête*. There was a general atmosphere of fuss; there were flowers in all the schoolrooms. The big gymnasium hall was arranged with chairs as for that terrible hardy annual, the School Concert, and festooned with decorations that made a feeble pretence of hiding the grim bareness of its everyday aspect. Mistresses fluttered here and there, flushed, excited, in holiday garb. Friends and relations poured in, in a steady stream of Sunday frocks. The Principal's temper was rising with the temperature of the crowded room.

It would appear that the Professional Men themselves were disposed to shirk this function, for the seats in the middle of the room were occupied almost exclusively by mothers, sisters, aunts, with an occasional small and profoundly bored brother. Almost the sole exception to this rule was a young parson, who, obviously having been brought there against his will by a

forceful female relation, sat conspicuous and very miserable in the front row, apparently too wretched even to look about him. The block of seats at each side of the room was given up to girls—girls big and little, girls plain and pretty, girls smirking with the conscious pride of prize-winners, down-cast girls who were there only in the humiliating position of spectators. There was a buzz of excited whispering; there were suppressed but invincible giggles. New frocks—for the most part white—were inspected with critical eyes, admired, condemned; their wearers bowed diminished heads, or sat erect, conscious and complacent, according as the general verdict was adverse or favourable. Favourite teachers were besought eagerly, as they entered the room, to sit near this or that devotee. Miss Clancy, the shrewd-tongued little Irishwoman who taught history and said exactly what she thought—but was nevertheless adored by certain chosen spirits,—shook her head to all blandishments, and sat down abruptly at the back of the room, where she could make any caustic comments that occurred to her, without let or hindrance. Following her, her inevitable shadow, came little fair-haired Miss Dimsdale, who worshipped her, dressed after her, feebly emulated her pungent speech, without the least success.

A fluttering, succeeded by a hush, ran through the waiting ranks of girls. Punctual to the

appointed hour, the Chairman of the Council was handing on to the platform the wife of the local member, the pretty, youthful, timid-looking Mrs Lymington-Carey : who had promised (with what heart-searching she alone knew) to give away the prizes. A very recent bride, she faced shyly the rows and rows of gazing eyes, still so much of a girl herself that she knew exactly what they were thinking and whispering. Followed other members of the Council, and a local big-wig or two ; and proceedings began.

It was not the custom at St Philip's to have any sort of entertainment preceding the prize-giving proper. This, doubtless, had its merits ; but it also gave to the Chairman of the Council an admirable opportunity for speech-making, of which he was not slow to avail himself. He was a small and fussy man, who fidgeted constantly with feet, hands, eyeglasses, anything and everything that was within his reach. With the ardent elaboration of the bad speaker who loves speaking, he detailed the doings of the school in the past year and the reports of the visiting examiners. He compared all this with former years. He congratulated the Principal and the other teachers, with laboured gallantry, on the successes gained and the increased numbers. He was heavily facetious over certain flaws in the examiners' report. He dwelt unctuously upon certain triumphs in connection with Local Examinations.

These inevitable preliminaries over, he launched upon a sea of platitude that seemed to have no shores. The listening girls fidgeted. The professional smile of the Principal became strained and weary. Only the visitors—happy souls—were free to look as bored as they felt. Little Mrs Lymington-Carey, shaking as she sat, smiling a frightened little smile to hide her terror, was probably the only person present who wished that speech longer than it was.

It came, at long last, rather suddenly to an end—apparently because the Chairman could think of nothing else to say. (A breath of relief swept through the crowded room. With fluttering and excitement, the youngest girl in the school advanced with a huge shower-bouquet of Malmaison carnations and smilax, holding it high to avoid treading on its long streamers of pink ribbon : bore it successfully to the platform : presented it successfully to the shy prize-giver ; returned to her place, smiling, relieved, scarlet. She was a noticeably pretty child, with yellow curls and blue eyes, and a smart frock all frills and embroidery.

"An innovation—hey?" commented Miss Clancy, in her lilting voice.

"Yes," murmured Miss Dimsdale in answer. "It always *has* been the Captain of the School, before ; but, really, Sarah *is*——" She paused expressively. It was a trick of hers to leave her sentences unfinished.

"Besides, Miss Tarlton hates her," said Miss Clancy, with a crisp, confirmatory nod of her head.

The prize-giving began with the Kindergarten—charming, stolid souls, too young to be acquainted with the meaning of nervousness. The only boy was received with additional applause and a facetious little speech from the Chairman—which he was fortunately too youthful either to understand or resent. Mrs Lymington-Carey, slightly reassured by the imperturbable calm of these babies, rallied her courage, and began to find the function not so terrible after all. Followed in quick succession the girls of Form One, Form Two, Form Three: embarrassment and self-consciousness increasing in direct proportion to age. Each prize-winner made her way up to the platform and down again through a storm of clapping; and by the length and loudness of this could be nicely gauged her popularity in the school. Mademoiselle, sitting carefully as far as might be from Fräulein, shuddered dramatically at the appalling ungracefulness of "*ces jeunes filles*," their stiff little ungainly bows, their stolid faces—contrasting all these mentally with a similar bevy of her own compatriots: but, with a Gallic truthfulness, found herself compelled to occasional admiration of some particularly pretty face or charming complexion. From the hulking hobble-

dehoys of Forms Four and Five—miserably blushing, deadly conscious of their hands and feet,—she was fain to avert her face altogether, glancing round her at the watchful and proud faces of mothers and friends. It was quite amusing to trace the relations of each prize-winner—an easy task : to note the complacent pride of those whose daughters had already been up to the platform : to observe the fluttering, fond anxiety of those whose turn was yet to come. Nothing escaped those sharp black Parisian eyes—not even the wretched young parson in the front row, who had scarcely looked up since the proceedings began ; nor the absurd likeness between a mother and daughter sitting rather far back, smiling exactly the same sweet, bright smile, watching eagerly—obviously of the number of those whose girl had not yet received her prize.

The last of Form Five—the most ungraceful, the reddest, the most conscious of hair “put up” on account of size rather than age—had blundered back from her terrible journey to the platform. Form Six, sitting proudly at the back of the room, shook out its skirts and patted its hair. Not for these exalted beings to show nervousness, whatever their inward feelings might be. They must comport themselves as became their position—as became people who would very shortly leave school, and “come out.”

"Form Six. Prize for Divinity — Sarah Garnett," the Chairman gave out ; and murmured apart to Mrs Lymington-Carey : "The Captain of the School."

It was quite a long walk forward from the very back of the room ; but the Captain of the School showed no embarrassment as she came forward. Her demeanour was, in fact, as free from excitement as was the decorous and moderate applause that hailed her. The meaning of Miss Dimsdale's cryptic remark became clear—Sarah Garnett was certainly, so far as appearance went, by no means a show-pupil. A really ugly girl is a rarity, for even plain features are usually redeemed by the "pig's beauty" of youthful contour and complexion ; but Sarah Garnett, in the inimitable words of Mary Ann Pratt's epitaph, "was that." Her best friend could not even have softened matters by calling her plain : the harsh, irregular features were too marked for any mild epithet. Her complexion was sallow : her black hair rough, untidy, carelessly arranged, her eyes inappropriately light in colour, unbeautifully small, extremely bright and observant. She was short, of an ungainly figure, badly and unbecomingly dressed in a crude dull blue. She wore cheap-looking shoes that creaked. In spite of all these drawbacks, however, she walked composedly up the room, received her prize, bowed awkwardly, and came back again : all without a trace of emo-

tion of any sort, though her small bright eyes flashed here and there about the room, as if nothing there escaped them.

"Prize for French—Sarah Garnett."

She left her place again, and proceeded to walk with unabated calm up the long room ; but the Chairman, who had been examining the prize-list, had something more to say.

"It appears," he observed facetiously, "that this young lady is carrying off all the prizes in the Sixth Form. Perhaps, under the circumstances, we can save her a little trouble, and ourselves a little time, by presenting them to her all at once."

The clapping was renewed, with rather more enthusiasm, while Sarah Garnett stood unmoved upon the platform. Mademoiselle, glancing rapidly round for the relations of this brilliant person, could see no excited, exultant faces at all ; but she did see two that were filled with astonishment, disappointment, and dismay—the faces of the mother and daughter who sat at the back of the room.

"Prize for History—Sarah Garnett. Prize for German—Sarah Garnett. Prize for Algebra—Sarah Garnett. Prize for Science—Sarah Garnett."

The Chairman's eye ran down to the end of his list, and he paused for a moment.

"No," he said. "I find that I have made a mistake. Miss Sarah Garnett does not carry off *all* the prizes in Form Six !"

There was a little ripple of laughter. Made-moiselle, darting a glance at the mother and daughter in the last row, saw that their pretty and pleasant faces had relaxed into smiles of relief.

Sarah Garnett received her armful of prizes with the same unmoved stolidity of manner. Young Mrs Lymington-Carey, in her relief at this wholesale lightening of her labours, was actually encouraged to say a few timid words of admiration; but, meeting those curious light, bright, observant eyes, faltered in the middle of her sentence, and relapsed into silence. This girl—"this *horrid* girl," thought the poor little timid lady, quite violently—was perfectly well aware how frightened and shy she was: was amused, interested, critical.

"Now, Miss Garnett, we can't spare you any more prizes to-day!" cried the Chairman of the Council merrily: only to stammer in his turn, as Sarah turned her eyes upon him. "By George!" he observed subsequently. "The girl made you feel as if you were under a microscope!"

Sarah went creaking back with her armful of books—as many as she could well carry—and as she went she took in, dispassionately and intently, the whole room and its assembly. It was not to her what it had been to most of the other prize-winners—a dim sea of faces, with only Mother's face shining out distinct and glad. She recognised, without the least ill-feeling, that her share of the

applause was perfunctory. She knew quite well that the Principal's glance conveyed less pride or approval for the pupil than personal dislike for the girl. She observed the young parson in the front row, met his glance for an instant, noted with interest that his eyes were remarkably blue for a man of dark complexion. She recognised approval in the rather cold eyes of Miss Crewe, honourably distinguished among her fellow-teachers by unfailing justice and a sense of humour. The two kind, simple faces—mother and daughter—in the back row were smiling and nodding pleasantly to her, but in a somewhat perfunctory fashion ; *she* was not the girl whose triumph they had come to see. She saw Miss Clancy and Miss Dimsdale exchange a comment, and she knew perfectly well what it was—it seemed to her that she could have voiced correctly the sentiments of every person there. She had scarcely reached her place, before the Chairman was giving out his final notice.

“English Essay Prize—Petronella King.”

No mistake about the applause this time ! It thundered as it had thundered for no other girl. One or two ardent spirits even forgot themselves so far as to drum with their feet—a heinous offence, quickly frowned down by the nearest teachers. The Principal beamed so obviously as to lay herself open, without appeal, to the charge of favouritism. As for the two kind, simple

faces in the back row, they positively shone with pride and joy. Even Mademoiselle's sharp features softened into lines of approval ; for here at last was a girl who walked well, who received her prize with a graceful little bow, who returned to her place without haste or embarrassment.

She had outgrown the continual insult of being called tall for her age, having arrived at her final height of five feet nine ; but she looked old for her age instead. She wore her hair, in the fashion of the moment, brushed back from her face and coiled in thick plaits behind. Her white muslin dress, of a simplicity so severe that it looked perhaps a little studied, was very becoming to the slight and graceful lines of her figure. She had the high carriage of the head, and the slim hands and feet, that are popularly supposed to denote gentle birth. Her large eyes, clear and dispassionately observant, ranged the room as she stepped down from the platform with her prize in her hand. She met full—and was singular in so doing, had she but known it—the glance of the young parson in the front row. She made a mental note that he was a stranger : and that she did not admire the contrast of black hair and vivid blue eyes. Probably an Irishman. Her path through life, at this stage in her career, was bestrewn with types, and she collected them with the impersonal, eager interest of a philatelist amassing stamps.

The tumult of applause, subsiding, was replaced by a general movement of preparation for departure. The Chairman had to say a few words of thanks to our kind friend Mrs Lymington-Carey ; but his hour was past, and he met with such scant attention as warned him to desist very soon. The august visitors on the platform removed the light of their presence ; the humbler visitors, down below in the body of the room, prepared to follow suit as quickly as might be. Excited prize-winners rushed to parents and friends to exhibit their treasures ; and the scent of Russia leather was strong in the air. Admiring school-fellows, less fortunate or less industrious, crowded round to inspect, to exclaim, to congratulate—some with generous sincerity, some with envy more or less well concealed. Petronella King had to make her way through quite a crowd of adoring adherents before she could reach her mother and sister.

"Such a relief to me," giggled Miss Harding, the drawing mistress, "that Sarah Garnett did not get *all* the prizes in the Sixth !"

"Why ?" said Miss Clancy, flashing round on her.

"Well, really, Sarah is *so* ——"

"Not being a beauty meself, I sympathise with her," said Miss Clancy grimly : whereat Miss Harding, who was no beauty either, looked foolish. "I'm thankful not to be artistic ; it seems I'm

spared a lot of suffering. For my part, I'm astonished that Sarah did *not* get the Essay Prize. Did any of ye see her essay?"

"*I* did," said little Miss Dimsdale, who had a weakness for being in everyone's confidence. "It was the queerest thing! Oh, no wonder Miss Tarlton did not wish people in general to see it—she burnt it. Oh, Nella King's *certainly* deserved the prize! Really beautiful English—so smooth——"

"Everyone knows that Nella's Period of English Literature for the Locals included Addison," said Miss Clancy, with one of her crisp nods. "What was the subject of the essay?"

"Oh, a queer thing—Miss Crewe chose it. Any two lines out of 'The Ancient Mariner.' They'd been doing it with her——"

"Oh, we all know that Miss Crewe is only unconventional within limits!" cried Miss Clancy, who was always perfectly outspoken in her views of all her fellow-teachers. "Which lines did Nella choose?—But I needn't ask!"

'He prayeth best who loveth best
All creatures, great and small.'

"*How* did you know?" cried Miss Dimsdale, in wonder and admiration.

"I know Nella," said Miss Clancy, with a cryptic laugh. "But Sarah's choice—no, I can't guess that! What was it?"

Miss Dimsdale gave a little shiver, and quoted reluctantly :

“The Nightmare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.”

“Um !” said Miss Clancy.

“Such a horrid choice ! and such a gruesome essay !” cried Miss Dimsdale, with another little shiver. “Oh, I think Miss Tarlton was *quite* right to burn it. Anyone who read it—any stranger, I mean—might have got the most *extraordinary* impression of what we teach the girls. It was most morbid and unwholesome—I really can't forget it ! And so horribly *real*, too. One might have thought she had actually seen all the dreadful things that she described.”

“There's nothing unreal about Sarah Garnett,” said Miss Clancy.

“I can't think how a girl of her age can have invented such things !” said Miss Dimsdale.

CHAPTER II

THE PAST

WHEN Peter King, eldest son of Sir Theodore King of Kynings, married Nellie Nation, the daughter of a tenant-farmer on the estate, his father did not cut him off with the proverbial shilling ; he settled four hundred a year on him, and intimated with a terrible suavity that he never wished to see his face again. This decree, if truth be told, was something of a relief to the bride, who was pretty, gentle, not quite seventeen, and desperately afraid of the soft-spoken old man with the grim, thin mouth : even more afraid than of the drunken old ruffian her father, Tom Nation—usually referred to by an unflattering sobriquet that just did not rhyme with his name. She adored the handsome young scapegrace her husband, with his gay laugh, and pleasant wheedling voice. She was far too simple to see anything remarkable in his being down from Oxford in the middle of May ; she was young and simple enough to find a stolen marriage the most romantic thing in the world. Four hundred a year seemed to

her limitless wealth. She had not been so happy at home that she should feel any great regret when Peter said to her, in his cheerful careless way : "Nellie, you're a darling, but I can't stick that father of yours, you know!" She acquiesced quite meekly in the resignation of home and friends. With Ruth's words at the back of her mind—she did not quote them to Peter, because that sort of thing was apt to make him laugh—she followed him with joyful obedience through a course of rather aimless wandering, which culminated finally in a little Sussex town that caught his vagrant fancy. A little semi-detached house in a row of semi-detached houses took his eye by reason of a gorgeous purple clematis over the door ; and funds were beginning to run a trifle low. Nellie was ailing—had been very far from strong, indeed, for weeks, though she had bravely hidden her discomfort until concealment was no longer possible. Peter took the house on a lease, docked it of its ridiculous name of Burlington House, called it Clematis Cottage, and declared his intention of settling down there as a family man for the rest of his natural life.

He was pleased with the placid, smiling baby who was born in the following April. He named her Millicent, after his mother, and talked vaguely of a reconciliation with his father. "If she'd only been a boy, there wouldn't have been the smallest difficulty!" he declared, in his lazy and cheerful

fashion—meaning scarcely anything, not realising at all that every word was taken at the foot of the letter by his literal Nellie. When the second child, born two years later, proved also to be a girl, the little mother fretted herself almost to death for her failure in duty—was so ill, in fact, that she effectually put an end to any future hope of a son and heir. Peter was genuinely alarmed and affectionate. He sat beside her and comforted her—when she was well enough to be comforted—and assured her that it was of no consequence at all. He was not in the least angry—he never was angry. In answer to Nellie's sobbing cry that no reconciliation was possible now, he assured her placidly that it never had been possible—old Sir Theodore had never yet been known to change his mind on any subject under the sun.

"But you said that it would have been all right if Milly had been a boy!" said poor Nellie, staring at him with large eyes in a pitifully thin face.

"Well, I didn't mean it. You might have known I didn't mean it," said Peter comfortably.

"I wanted the baby to be called after you," wailed the simple Nellie, unconsoled.

"Oh, well, we'll call her by the feminine form of Peter!—What is it? Petronella, to be sure; why, that takes us both in, and will do capitally!"

The simple conceit pleased the young wife. His ingenious solution of a difficulty pleased the

young husband. The baby was duly christened Petronella.

Young Mrs Peter King had discovered very early in her married life that four hundred a year was not, after all, the inexhaustible riches of her imagination. To the day of his death, Peter never learnt that a married man with an inelastic income should lead rather a different life from the bachelor son of a rich man, with no ties at all; and it was the main object of his wife's life that he should not make that discovery. His cigars still cost 110s. a hundred; but fortunately he liked a pipe better, in a general way. Fortunately, too, he was not a wine-drinker, or she might have found the fiction very speedily impossible of preservation. He was the sort of man who is perfectly content with the simplest necessities of life, so long as he can retain the luxuries. Mrs Peter was singularly adaptable. Coming from a home where she had never possessed an evening dress in her life, it was an astonishment to find that Peter regarded such novel raiment as a matter of natural every-evening occurrence. Her fingers were skilful, and she fashioned clothing for herself, and subsequently for the little girls, at astonishingly small cost. From time to time, as the years went on, Peter made ostentatious protestations that he really must find something to do: but further than that statement he never went. The lazy, peaceful life suited him to perfection. He

made one or two friends of a sufficiently congenial sort. He had only one real ambition in life, and that was the reduction of his golf-handicap. He was not in the least intentionally selfish. It never occurred to him that his wife was sometimes put to great straits in order to furnish him with the little luxuries that he loved. He always maintained, with entire good faith, that golf was an inexpensive game.

He died at thirty-two, very unexpectedly, after a week's illness—the result of watching a professional golf-match in a storm of sleet and an east wind. He died lightly, carelessly, as he had lived, perhaps never quite realising that he was so near the end: for his only spoken regret was a whimsical wish that he had just succeeded in exchanging his minus handicap for the coveted plus. Life had treated him kindly enough. He probably expected a similar gentle treatment at the hands of Death. No anxiety for wife or children crossed his mind—Nellie had always been such an admirable manager, that he had presumably forgotten long ago the existence of any necessity for management. She had never troubled him with details; he did not trouble himself now. She nursed him to admiration, night and day: did not break down, even when all was over: went to the funeral, young and pathetic in her widow's weeds, with a little fair-haired, frightened child clinging to each hand: came home, and sat down straightway to

write to her father-in-law. Her steady hand shook a little for the first time, as she addressed the envelope—the first time that she had had occasion to write the name of her native village since she left it.

The reply came by return from old Sir Theodore : prompt, suave, clear.

“DEAR MADAM,” he wrote, “I am obliged to you for your letter, telling me of the death of my son Peter : of which, however, I was already aware. Let me set at rest any anxiety which you may feel—since I cannot bring myself to believe that he has made any sort of provision for you or his children—by saying at once that I propose to continue to you the allowance which I have hitherto made to him. I have also made arrangements whereby, after your death, it will be continued to the children. You seem to suppose me unaware of their existence. I have, as a matter of fact, seen them both. The elder resembles you and the younger her father—with, I should judge, rather more intellect. I have no wish to see them again, either now or at any future time. My property, as you may know, is strictly entailed in the male line. My three surviving sons are all suitably married, and have provided me with seven grandsons : so that I see no probability of any disputed inheritance.—Yours faithfully,

“THEODORE KING.”

Young Mrs King deciphered the crabbed old handwriting with difficulty, with relief, with perturbation. Calling the little girls, she made strict inquiries as to the mysterious statement that their grandfather had seen them ; and learnt of a queer old man, riding a black horse, who had come upon them unexpectedly one day, had stared, had frightened Milly and made Petronella indignant. He had asked their names in a queer, soft voice, had smiled disagreeably to himself, had ridden away as mysteriously as he had come. The incident had occurred years ago, in a brief, rare interval when father and mother were away for a night. In the rapture and excitement of their return, neither child had remembered to say anything of the not very thrilling incident. It gave Mrs King an odd, uncanny, uncomfortable feeling to realise how close a watch the terrible old man must have kept on every detail of their simple life, to time his visit so accurately. She had always been afraid of him, and now she was more afraid than ever—though thankful, too, that he had not taken away their sole source of income.

All her planning and good management was now transferred to the children ; for her own wants were few and simple. She had all an uneducated woman's respect for education, all a low-born woman's respect for birth. Peter King's daughters must be brought up as became their

father's station, and she was aware, in all humility, how little she herself was fitted to contribute to that end. Fortunately for her—since separation would have been almost more than she could bear—St Philip's School was at hand : an excellent school, and by no means cheap. Mrs King saved every available penny to give her girls every advantage. Indeed, to tell the truth, she wasted many a pound that she could ill spare over music-lessons for Milly : who, with the most defective of ears, but with all her mother's conscientiousness and perseverance, wept and toiled over long hours of practice that resulted in nothing at all—except torture, long drawn-out, for the long-suffering German lady who taught her. She was only one victim of that benighted age when all girls were taught to play "pieces," quite irrespective of their natural powers. Petronella suffered less, having some small taste for music and a pretty singing-voice ; but she refused quite definitely to have drawing-lessons, and even incited the gentle Milly to make a similar stand.

"What *is* the good ?" said Petronella, looking at her mother with clear, determined eyes. "I can't draw—I never shall be able to ; and neither will Milly. It wouldn't be the least use to us. I don't want to waste time and money over things that have nothing to do with my Work."

It had always been an accepted fact, from Petronella's childhood, that she was to be an

author. Mrs King adored the child who resembled her father, worshipped her cleverness, could see no fault in her ; and Milly, another humble devotee, worshipped in concert. Petronella's ambition was no secret ; she read her stories aloud without shyness to anyone who would listen to them. She refused quite calmly to take any trouble with those lessons which had no direct bearing on her ambition. Literature and poetry she would study, in school and out, with intense zeal ; and history she learnt steadily, though with less enthusiasm. But the sterner tasks—arithmetic, algebra, botany, science—were all anathema to her. Being clever, she took just enough pains over them to pass her from one Form to another without trouble ; and that was all.

Mrs King, living wrapped up in her children, made few personal friends ; her interests were bounded by the four walls of her little home—except, indeed, in any case where kindness was needed, and there her soft heart led her unerringly. The children, of course, made friends at school, went to tea with them, invited them in return ; but Mrs King, exchanging timid calls with their mothers, never went beyond the limits of mere formal acquaintance. This was not, as a matter of fact, entirely due to her shyness, or her very humble opinion of herself. Her kind heart had led her on one occasion into a deplorable indiscretion, and the rest of the little town, passing by on

the other side, could neither understand, nor forget, nor forgive.

In the house next door to Clematis Cottage there came to live, just after Peter King's death, a retired doctor of the name of Garnett, who had for many years given up practice, and devoted himself to experimental chemistry. The inhabitants of the little country town regarded Dr Garnett from the first with suspicion—a doctor of medicine once, should be a doctor of medicine always: unless, indeed, he grew too old for his work, as was sometimes hinted of old snuff-taking Dr Denyer. But Dr Garnett repulsed most brusquely a few would-be patients who went tentatively to him. He made it abundantly evident that he did not practise, or want to practise; did not want society; did not want, in fact, to see anything at all of his neighbours. He built himself a little laboratory at the bottom of his garden, and there shut himself in, practically day and night. The offended neighbours looked askance at him; and at Mrs Garnett, for quite other reasons, they looked more askance still, though she, differing from her husband in every conceivable way, was quite pathetically anxious to make friends with one and all. She was very young, very pretty, not quite a lady: an incomprehensible wife for such a husband. Her extreme anxiety for friendship told against her almost as heavily as her husband's recluse habits. Men told their wives that she was a flighty

little idiot. Women told their husbands that she—almost certainly!—painted; and after that Mrs Garnett's chances in the self-righteous little town were not worth a brass farthing. For some months she paraded her fluffy curls, her rather conspicuous clothes, her too pink cheeks, in church and shops and wherever people most did congregate, seeking for companionship with the most pathetic frankness. For some months, baffled at every turn, she brooded at home, or went for solitary walks over the Downs towards the sea. Then came a rather swaggering cousin, staying somewhere in the neighbourhood and riding over frequently—censorious people quickly said too frequently. Mrs Garnett, walking with him on the Downs, met with averted or shocked glances from all whom she met: at first with a stare of surprise, then with flushing cheeks, finally with hard, bright eyes, and head held high. Then, quite suddenly, the cousin went; and Mrs Garnett went with him, leaving behind her a bewildered husband and an ugly little black-haired child. The little town held up its hands and screamed with horror; and would have been righteously indignant if it had been accused, individually or collectively, of having pushed quite a harmless, silly young woman over the rigid barrier that pens in the well-behaved.

The storm of scandal, surging high, broke in even where Mrs King sat desolate in her widow's weeds with her little black-frocks girls beside her.

She had been so withdrawn from the life of the place in her mourning, that even details respecting her next-door neighbour had passed her by ; and at first she was too much surprised to understand.

"Leaving her husband without a word—and the child !" said the self-righteous one who brought the tale.

"And the child ?" said Mrs King. She rose up suddenly, a little flushed and very indignant, and went straight, without knock or ring, through the deserted house next door to where Dr Garnett sat stunned in his laboratory, staring straight in front of him, and the little Sarah played a queer unchildish game with retorts and test-tubes at his feet. The house was dirty, frowsy, neglected ; the untidy maidservant was gossiping with a kindred spirit—of course on the all-absorbing topic—half a dozen doors away. Mrs King, sweeping through the place like a wholesome, fresh sea-breeze, opened windows, dusted and tidied with her own hands, caused the untidy servant to be sent packing without delay, found with astonishing speed a sensible middle-aged treasure to undertake the care of house and master and child. Ugly little Sarah, used to neglect from her father and something very like aversion from her pretty mother, observed Mrs King with bright little attentive eyes, and swore fealty to her from that moment.

The little town took all this very badly indeed. It was not for Mrs King—a very humble person

—to set an example, to take an entirely individual line of conduct: even, it might be thought, to cast reproach on those who had acted differently. People found it hard to forgive her. Other mothers, drawing away the skirts of their respectable clothing from chance contact with the child of an abandoned mother, did not wish her to “mix with” Clara and Dolly and Helen, since everyone knows what comes of touching pitch. Mrs King, with quite a fierce spark in her gentle eyes, only mothered the forsaken child more tenderly, letting her run in and out of Clematis Cottage as she pleased. It would have seemed impossible for so mild a spirit to be so up in arms.

She might, indeed, have lived this offence down in the course of years, had she not aggravated it by something infinitely worse. For before the scandal had well died down—since a country town is more apt to nurse its grievances for nine months or nine years than the proverbial nine days—Mrs Garnett came back again—to die. Her husband took her in without a word: perhaps, since he was just then very deeply engaged in a most critical experiment, he hardly realised that she was there at all. Mrs King, braving afresh the horror of her neighbours, tended her through a brief sharp illness, held the fluffy head on her breast at the end, and followed her—the only mourner, since Dr Garnett was locked in his laboratory at the time of the funeral—to the grave. After that flagrant braving

of local opinion, it was hardly to be expected that she would ever be received again into the good graces of the little narrow-minded town. She was kinder than ever to the little Sarah. She bearded Dr Garnett in his den, in defiance of the evillest of odours, to wring from him a consent to send the child to school some years later—when the scandal was so far a matter of the past, that local mothers could bring themselves with an effort to face the contingency of Sarah's "mixing with" Clara and Dolly and Helen. Over Sarah's successes Mrs King rejoiced with almost the delight of a mother—not even jealous for Petronella, who, if she had ever chosen to work in the same way, would, of course, have been easily first. Sarah must naturally, in the future, earn her own living in some way not yet defined. Milly, placid and domestic, would never be at a loss for employment, so long as the need for home-making existed. Petronella's future was mapped out quite clearly as it had been ever since she was a little child; one does not seek to direct the development of a genius.

CHAPTER III

THE FUTURE

"It seems impossible to realise," said Petronella, "that we've done with school altogether; that next term everything will go on there as usual—only we shall stay at home."

"I know I felt just like that when I left," said Milly, in her soft voice.

"I don't feel like that at all," said Sarah. At which Milly, who liked to agree with everyone, looked a little unhappy, sought in vain for some pleasant way of hedging, and, failing to find any, went on with her sewing. She was a beautiful needlewoman, and loved her work without pretence. Petronella sat upright on the grass, clasping her knees and staring with unseeing eyes at the back of the house. Sarah, sprawling ungracefully, poked away at a little tuft of grass, her odd, light eyes very intent on it.

"It's like the end of one chapter and the beginning of another," said Milly at last. She was pleased with the inspiration, since its literary flavour might find favour in the eyes of Petro-

nella ; and her pretty smile came back. "Now we have to wait and see what it will be about !"

"What's the use of *waiting* ?" said Sarah. "That's a poor way of spending the time !"

"I know what mine will be about," said Petronella, with calm decision.

"Of course you do," said Milly admiringly.

"It will mean everything to me," said Petronella, "to be able to keep to regular hours of writing—when I am sure of not being disturbed. Real Work is quite hopeless, without that. Besides, if one has a profession, one ought to be able to keep regular hours, like a man. It's only fair. People talk of the inferiority of women's Work—look at the difference between their chances and a man's !"

"Of course !" murmured Milly, profoundly impressed. Sarah, pulling grass to pieces with busy fingers, listened in silence. She was not a great talker at any time ; and she also had an ardent admiration for Petronella.

"I am lucky," the latter went on serenely, "to have known—always—what I meant to do. I haven't wasted any time. Now that I have left school, I can devote myself to my Work without any more delay."

"Shan't you ever play tennis or anything ?" Milly inquired timidly.

"Of course," said Petronella. "Didn't I tell you that I meant to keep to regular hours ?"

However much one loves one's Work, one must have relaxation sometimes."

Milly looked relieved.

"When shall you publish your first book?" she inquired, with awe.

"I don't know," said Petronella frankly. "I must begin, of course, at the Bottom of the Ladder, and Work Up. I am quite prepared for that. I don't mind how humble the beginning is—or if I don't get paid anything at all to begin with——"

"You've no right to undersell the market," said Sarah, in her abrupt fashion. "If a thing is worth reading, it's worth paying for."

Petronella looked a little taken aback. "I hadn't thought of that," she said, with meditative honesty.

"But *of course* Nella will get paid!" Milly cried, indignant and enthusiastic. "I expect, in quite a little while, she will be making a *fortune*—perhaps forty or fifty or sixty pounds a year!"

"It doesn't always follow," said Sarah drily. "Milton got five pounds for *Paradise Lost*, you know."

Milly looked a little bewildered: argument very quickly left her stranded. "But Nella isn't going to write *poetry*," she said vaguely, but with unabated loyalty.

"I wish we could look on ahead—ten years, or even five years," said Petronella thoughtfully.

"I should love to see what we shall all be doing then. Ten years—doesn't it seem an age! Why, Milly will be over thirty!" Her tone implied an unthinkable horror.

"What would you like to see?" asked Sarah, in her abrupt fashion.

Petronella had no doubts on that subject, nor any diffidence in discussing it.

"I should like to have written the Book of the Year," she said calmly. "I should have been quite a well-known author—oh, for a long time!—but this book would be my Masterpiece. Everyone would be talking about it, and there would be reviews praising it in all the papers, and there would be a new edition every month; and people would be always coming to interview me, and my photographs would be in all the shop windows. It would be the most brilliant book that had been written since—since Thackeray. I should know all the other famous people quite well, especially the novelists—Conan Doyle, and Stanley Weyman, and Henry Wray."

"And of course you will be very rich?" said Milly, gasping a little at the dazzling brilliance of this dream: but changing the conditional tense for the future with the most entire confidence.

"Oh, I suppose so. I don't care much about that," said Petronella loftily. "Of course I should like to have enough money to buy mother a

lovely house in the country, and plenty of servants, and carriages and things. And you shall have heaps of lovely frocks, Milly, and two tennis-courts, and a diamond necklace. And Sarah—what would you like, Sarah?"

Sarah shook her head. "I'd like a ring—for a keepsake," she said. "But I'd rather be independent, and not have everything given to me."

"Wouldn't you be married, Nella?" asked Milly timidly.

"Oh, I suppose so: if I met the right sort of man," said Petronella. "I shouldn't like *not* to be married, of course. But he must never get in the way of my Work—because I should always be much fonder of that than of him."

"And—wouldn't you have any children?" said Milly, more timidly still.

"No!" said Petronella, with decision. "I don't care for babies—and they would be dreadfully in the way of my Work."

"Oh!" said Milly: in such a tone of dismay that Sarah looked at her and laughed.

"That wouldn't be Milly's point of view!" she said.

"Oh, no!" said Milly. "If—if I were married, I should like to have *dozens*!" She blushed a sudden deep emotional pink all over her pretty face.

Petronella gave her a kind, condescending pat,

as if she herself were the elder sister. "Well, if your husband is poor, I'll see that you have plenty of money," she promised generously.

"Oh, thank you, Nella!" cried the simple Milly, with faith so firm that her gratitude was perfectly genuine.

"And you, Sarah—" said Petronella, considering.

Sarah pulled herself up suddenly from the grass. "I!" she said. "Oh, I don't worry about what is going to happen ten years hence! I'm going to qualify as a chemist; and then I can help my father in his work."

This unexpected introduction of practical, present-day considerations affected the two dreamers rather like a dash of cold water in the face. It made them suddenly realise that Petronella's House of Fame was as yet far away in the clouds: that they were not in the park of a great novelist's country mansion, but in a long, narrow garden, belonging to a semi-detached house in a provincial town: that Milly's cotton frock was faded through repeated washings, and that Sarah's shoes needed soling. They looked at one another with wide and disillusioned eyes.

"I say—I'm most awfully sorry to bother you——"

The head of a young man—a stranger—had appeared over the top of the high wooden fence that divided their garden from the next. He had light curly hair and a pleasant boyish voice, and

was decidedly good-looking. If there was a certain air of inefficiency about him, it was perhaps accounted for by the fact that the curly hair was in extreme disorder, and the handsome face by no means clean.

"Could you tell me how long I ought to boil an egg?" He looked in a pleading and ingratiating manner at the three girls; his glance lingered on Petronella. But it was Sarah who gave a spasmodic little laugh of irrepressible amusement, and Milly who replied promptly: "Three and a half minutes."

"I think there must be some mistake." He raised, in an extremely dirty hand, a large iron saucepan of obvious newness, and looked distrustfully at its contents. "I tried three and a half minutes—and five—and ten; and the beastly thing is *always* raw!"

"Perhaps your fire is too low," suggested Milly helpfully.

"It's a gas-ring—full on——"

"Why did you put the egg in cold water, then?" said Sarah, leaping to a solution in her uncanny fashion.

"Oh—oughtn't I to have done that?" He looked astonished and relieved.

Mrs King, coming down the garden path, was mildly surprised to find the girls hobnobbing with a complete stranger; but accepted the explanation with serenity. Her matrimonial experiences had

not prepared her to expect much everyday common-sense from a man.

"You are Dr Emery?" she asked, a little doubtfully.

"Yes," he said : adding quickly, in response to her tone : "I'm *really* much older than I look—I'm twenty-six!"

Mrs King passed the statement with her placid smile : much more concerned to make her characteristic suggestion : "Can I do anything to help?"

"Everything is in a most ghastly muddle," he confessed. "But—oh, it will be all right! I couldn't think of bothering you."

"Moving is a tiresome business," said Mrs King. "I shall be *glad* to help you in any way."

Her tone was so sincere that his protestations weakened. He confessed himself in despair ; "but I'd be ashamed for you to see the state of things!" he added, with a frank laugh.

"I will come round at once," said Mrs King.

"Let us come too!" cried the girls.

"Oh, rather!—If you don't mind!" said Dr Emery, with a perfectly unprofessional tone and manner.

They had to go back through the house, out of their own front gate, and in at the one next door, which proclaimed "Dr Wilfred Emery" on a new and shining brass plate. All the paint was new also, on gate and house ; but the little front garden was a wilderness, depressing to contem-

plate, and, when Dr Emery himself opened his hall-door to them, Mrs King fairly gasped at the state of things revealed inside. Furniture was stacked, higgledy-piggledy, so that there was scarcely any room to get by. An open door on the right revealed the counterpart of their own drawing-room next door, so far as size and shape were concerned ; a beautiful new carpet was duly laid, and on it were piles of crockery, unopened packing-cases, miscellaneous furniture belonging to bedrooms, dining-room, kitchen—all in hopeless confusion.

Mrs King's prevailing instinct was to set people at their ease. She said nicely : "It is always wisest to get the necessary rooms ready first, and leave the others—you are quite right."

"The necessary rooms !" He looked at her and laughed. "Wait till you see the kitchen !"

"May I ?" said Mrs King.

They went downstairs ; and at the foot of them her placidity for once failed her completely. "But your servants should have put this straight *first*, Dr Emery !" she cried, appalled.

"Servants ! Oh, I haven't got any servants !" said Dr Emery, rubbing his curly hair all the wrong way.

"No servants !" exclaimed Mrs King.

"I thought it would be better to get them on the spot—people told me it was the wisest plan to get everything locally," he explained. "I went

to the registry office the very first thing this morning, as soon as I arrived ; but there wasn't anyone there who would do at all. I saw a list of people who were just what I wanted," he added hopefully.

Mrs King regarded him with compassion ; it appeared that he looked upon this matter lightly—as a man may go into a shop and buy a pair of boots without difficulty.

"Had you expected to find someone to suit you on the spot?" she asked mildly.

"Why, yes! Isn't that what registry offices are for?" he cried gaily. "I suppose I hit on an unlucky day."

Mrs King had not the heart to crush this cheery optimist. She merely suggested: "Don't you think—till you are suited with servants—that it would be as well to have a charwoman, just to put the house straight?"

"What a splendid idea!" cried Dr Emery, his bright face brightening still more.

"I know of a very nice woman, if you like," said Mrs King. "And she can cook quite well—"

"Cook! Oh, I'll pay anything she likes if she can *cook*," said Dr Emery, with much feeling ; and he glanced uncomfortably at a broken egg that had spread itself to an unaccountable distance over the hearthstone.

"Sarah, just go and ask Mrs Pantin to come at once. I know she is disengaged," said Mrs King.

"Oh, I couldn't think of troubling——" Dr Emery began to protest; but Sarah was gone already. A suspicious sound of laughter, coming through the closed door, made the master of the house flush a little.

Mrs King proceeded to a gentle but penetrating examination of the multitudinous parcels, half unpacked, which littered every corner of the kitchen. "I see that everything is new," she said tentatively.

"Oh, yes—I never did any housekeeping before!" He made the obvious statement with much cheerfulness. "I was advised to get everything on the spot—I told you. I've been shopping all the morning—it was easier than I expected; everyone was uncommonly kind and ready to suggest things that I should never have thought of!"

"You will hardly need a marmalade-cutter—at any rate, in August," suggested Mrs King gently.

"Well, it seemed to save a tremendous lot of trouble; and the man said that it is much cheaper to make it at home than to buy it—and that's a consideration, you see. Especially as I eat a good deal of squi—marmalade," said Dr Emery.

"You seem to have—almost *more* than you need in some ways," said Mrs King tentatively.

"Well, *I* don't know anything about it. I daresay the man saw that," said Dr Emery ingenuously. "I *told* him that he would know a great

deal better than I did, and I just bought what he said I wanted. I did think some of the things were jolly dear. That knife-machine, you know—three pounds fifteen and three—it's a lot of money, when you are trying to keep the expenses down."

"You don't need that *at all*," said Mrs King, with firmness.

"I say, don't I, really?" said Dr Emery, brightening still more. "I wonder if the man would take it back, then? That would make a distinct difference—and the bill did seem something appalling, when I came to pay it."

Mrs King reflected. She was the last woman in the world to pry into a stranger's affairs; but the fire was kindling in her housewifely soul.

"Here's the bill, if you wouldn't mind looking at it," said Dr Emery, with much simplicity: unconsciously saving her from her dilemma.

Mrs King took it: read it: flushed with indignation.

"A Copper Bain Marie!" she cried. "An Ice Cave! A Marble Mortar, with a Lignum Vitæ Pestle! I never heard of such a thing—Standish must be mad!"

"He knew I didn't know, of course," said Dr Emery humbly.

Mrs King crushed the offending bill in her hand. The girls had never seen her so moved. "I should like to go over it with him, item by

item, and make him take back half!" she cried.

"But it would be the most appalling nuisance for you!" said Dr Emery, construing her explosion of wrath into a literal offer.

Mrs King hesitated, and then laughed like a girl. After all, he was nothing but a singularly helpless young man—and her ruling passion, after that of mothering the forlorn, was housekeeping.

"I should enjoy it thoroughly, if you would really let me," she said. "Now, here is Mrs Pantin; and we can see what ought to be done first."

This was a little difficult to decide, when everything needed doing; but, under Mrs King's efficient generalship, Mrs Pantin and Milly were left to work their will in the kitchen; Sarah carried off piles of crockery into the scullery to wash and sort, and Petronella was entrusted with the congenial task of unpacking cases of books: while Dr Emery acted showman to his house. Mrs King, fully entering into the spirit of the thing, laughed till she cried at the ingenuity with which all the furniture had been bestowed in the wrong rooms.

"You will have the front one for your drawing-room, I suppose—as we have?" she suggested.

"I meant it for the dining-room," he replied. "I—I don't think I thought of having a drawing-room." His eyes wandered to where Petronella

was dusting a book-shelf, and he added hastily :
"At any rate, for the present."

"You don't want all these kept, I suppose?" said Petronella, looking up from her work. "I suppose they were just used for packing and padding—old local guide-books—heaps of them."

"Oh, don't throw them away, please!" cried Dr Emery.

"Just pleasant remembrances of places you know, of course," said Mrs King, to save the situation : for Petronella's straight brows were a little disdainful.

"Oh, no!" he replied cheerfully. "It's never been my luck to get holidays like *that*!" He laid an affectionate finger on the top book of the heap, gaudy with crude blue that aimed at reproducing a Mediterranean sky. "But it's easy enough to get the *books*—they send them, if you send a post-card to ask,—and that's the next best thing to going to the places. You've no idea, unless you've tried it, how jolly it is to follow a cruise on the map—especially if some fellow you know is actually doing it—and read up all the places as you go. As for the British Isles, I find that I know Devon and Cornwall, and the Isle of Man, and the Trossachs, and Killarney, a good deal better than half the people who have really been there. Besides, think what a pull I'll have when things improve, and I can go myself!" His bright face positively glowed.

As Petronella still looked a trifle scornful of these very modest castles in the air, Mrs King mildly suggested that it must be tea-time ; and invited their new neighbour to come back with them.

"It sounds uncommonly jolly," said Dr Emery, with frank gratitude. "I feel as if an age had passed since breakfast !"

"*Breakfast !*" cried Mrs King. "Have you had no lunch, then ?"

He shook his curly head, with a comically shame-faced glance at Petronella. "I meant to cook my own here. It—wasn't a success," he confessed, laughing.

"Come home with us, *at once*, then !" said Mrs King firmly. "Nella, go and call Milly and Sarah."

"Oh, I'll go !" cried Dr Emery ; and ran down the basement stairs in his boyish fashion. "I say !" he exclaimed, looking round his own kitchen with astounded eyes. "It's—it's like a miracle !"

"We haven't quite finished," said Milly, rather shyly, pulling her sleeves down over her plump white arms. She was a little flushed, and her hair a little dishevelled, but only pleasantly so. She looked a very charming and capable young housewife, as she glanced, with pardonable pride, round the kitchen that her labours had helped to transform. Mrs Pantin, in the middle distance,

could be seen on hands and knees, scrubbing out the larder with enormous zeal. Sarah, who worked like lightning whenever she set her hand to a task, was arranging crockery on the dresser with rapid, efficient, ungraceful movements.

"Your mother says it's tea-time.—I say," said Dr Emery, "you've all been most awfully good to me, and I don't even know your name! Isn't that absurd?"

"Our name is King," said Milly, blushing a good deal as she looked up at him. He was a great deal taller than she was, and she liked that; and he was undeniably very good-looking, and she liked that too.

"You are Miss Milly—and that is Miss Sarah——"

"Oh, I'm not a King! I should have thought you might have seen that for yourself!" said Sarah, in her brusque, ungracious fashion. "My father, Dr Garnett, lives in the next house to Mrs King's on the other side."

"Not Dr Matthias Garnett, the chemist?" cried Dr Emery.

"Oh, you *have* heard of him, have you?" said Sarah.

"I say, I *am* in luck to have come here!" said Dr Emery, with fervour.

Milly, absurdly, blushed a little more; and said hastily that her mother must be waiting for them.

The good housekeeper is never taken at a disadvantage ; and Mrs King's tea-table—none of your miserable drawing-room makeshifts—fairly groaned under the plentiful supplies with which she loaded it for the hungry young man. Dr Emery ate, with apologies, like a schoolboy ; and Mrs King beamed encouragement at him. She liked to see her good things appreciated ; and she had taken a very kindly liking to this grown-up boy.

"I always *am* lucky, you see," he confided to her happily. "Coming here at all, for instance—not counting all your kindness. I never supposed for a moment that I could afford to buy Dr Denyer's practice."

"Well, it isn't what it used to be, you know," said Mrs King gently.

"He's an old man, of course. Rather a muddler too, perhaps," said Dr Emery, with all cheerfulness. "He'd actually lost all the accounts of the last ten years, poor old chap !"

"But you were satisfied ?" said Sarah. She shot the question at him with a tone and manner not at all like a girl's. Looking at her in surprise, he seemed a little bewildered by her sharp eyes.

"Satisfied ? Oh, rather ! Why, everything was simply splendid, as far as it went ! It wasn't to be expected that the poor old fellow would be very business-like at his age. Why, he must be nearly eighty !"

Said Milly to Petronella that night, in the confidential stage of hair-brushing: "Don't you think he's *very* handsome?"

"Do you mean Dr Emery?" said Petronella, roused from the contemplation of a new plot for one of her stories.

"Why, of course," said Milly simply.

"I like a man to have more chin," said Petronella, in a tone of dispassionate criticism.

CHAPTER IV

SARAH INTERFERES

It is a tradition, with country folks, that your Londoner may live all his life next door to the same neighbour without ever learning his name. Such is not the custom in the average country town—it is doubtful if it would ever have been Mrs King's custom anywhere. She spent a thoroughly happy fortnight helping her next-door neighbour to move in, battling with grasping tradesmen on his behalf, finding and engaging servants for him—a stolid, solid, middle-aged cook-housekeeper, and a young girl who was reported to be "biddable." Dr Emery was extremely grateful. More than that, he proved to be one of those rare beings who actually take the advice for which they ask. Mrs King mothered him to her heart's content, as if he had been the longed-for son whom she had never possessed. She went diligently into all the details of his household plenishing; and only laughed subsequently in secret when his theories and expectations proved too ludicrous for her house-

wifely soul : not divulging even to the girls—though she laid it by for her own private delectation—the weird linen-list which he had compiled for himself, with infinite labour, from a heap of catalogues. Milly worked her fingers almost to the bone making curtains and blinds, hemming dusters, marking sheets and towels in beautiful red cross-stitch. Sarah undertook various heavy and disagreeable jobs which nobody was likely to want. Petronella, in the intervals of leisure between the hours allotted to her Work, turned her hand quite kindly, if a little loftily, to the pleasanter of the necessary tasks, and earned—such is the nature of things—far more gratitude than either of the others. It was her suggestion of The End House which was finally adopted to replace the impossible Ranelagh which had been the builder's original fancy choice. Perhaps Milly was a little disappointed that her suggestion—The Hollies : which was quite justified by two large bushes in the little front garden—was not adopted ; but she was quite ready to believe that Petronella's choice, like everything connected with her, was naturally the best of all conceivable possibilities.

Inevitably, before many weeks had passed, Dr Emery found out the narrow limits of his new practice : learnt how one patient after another had slipped through the paralytic, untrustworthy fingers of old Dr Denyer : discovered with the

frankest dismay that he had wasted his scanty funds on what was not worth buying. He came and poured out his woes to Mrs King, exactly as a schoolboy tells his mother of an undeserved beating ; and then, after some twenty minutes of depression, he suddenly burst out laughing, and rose to the surface of his sea of troubles with a cork-like buoyancy. After all, the practice had once been good, and would doubtless, not so very far hence, be just as good again. The place was jolly, his house was jolly, everybody was jolly to him. The weather was ripping, the tennis-courts at the Club were splendid, and he was "jolly keen." And—in order that it might not be all play and no work—he proposed to fill up some of his too-abundant spare time with a course of Ambulance Lectures.

It was astonishing how many girls of the neighbourhood—and many others who hardly came under that head—proved anxious to learn First Aid. Petronella went, on the ground that a smattering of medical knowledge would be useful to her in her Work. Sarah neither troubled nor needed to make excuse : everyone knew that she was attracted to any form of learning as a needle flies to a magnet. Milly, with blushes, faltered out a rather incoherent account of how often she had longed to know exactly what to do or advise when she met with illness or accident in her district. The three were fairly typical examples

of Dr Emery's audience ; but the Milly class outnumbered the others in overwhelming proportion.

He proved a good, if rather slangy, lecturer ; and medical interest ran high among the girls and so-called girls of the little town. A few slack people dropped off after the first or second lecture ; but the rest attended every time with unflagging zeal, and practised bandaging at home until their victims rebelled—especially fathers and brothers, who were in strong demand by reason of the more accommodating nature of their clothing. Milly read her little brown book in season and out of season, with anxious intentness, until her pretty blue eyes were quite dull, and she was overheard talking of Irritant Poisons in her sleep. Petronella was too proud to let it appear that she had to take the smallest pains over the lectures ; but she also devoted a good deal of time, especially when alone, to serious study of the brown book, and kept a manuscript list of Fevers, with their respective Symptoms and Treatment, in her pocket for odd moments. Sarah was one of those fortunate and marvellous people who never forget what they have once read.

"How you do worry over it, Milly !" said Petronella one day, when Milly had studied herself into a headache that prevented her from going to a tennis-party.

"It would be so dreadful to fail in the exam. !" said Milly.

"You're getting quite thin," said Petronella.

"Oh, I'm *not*!" Milly protested instantly.

"Yes, you are," Petronella insisted. "Quite thin and pale—isn't she, Sarah?"

On the second count, Milly protested innocence immediately by a vivid scarlet blush. Sarah's quick eyes flicked a glance from her face to Petronella's, where they lingered for a moment.

"I think it's quite as much the tennis as the lectures," she said drily.

The Club tennis-ground was some little distance away—possibly twenty minutes' walk; but that was thought of little account in the era before bicycling had taught boys and girls to forget how to walk; and, indeed, in some cases the leisurely stroll home, in a state of pleasant weariness, was reckoned the best part of the afternoon's amusement. It was the most natural thing in the world that Clematis Cottage should be escorted home by The End House. Sarah played badly and seldom. Petronella played well, and Milly very well; it was another of the most natural things in the world that their next-door neighbour should very frequently be the partner of one or the other, and that almost as frequently he should be invited in to supper afterwards. He never failed to accept such invitations with alacrity; he seemed perfectly contented to spend any number of evenings in Mrs King's pleasant drawing-room, where Petronella sang and Milly sewed. There was to be

quite an elaborate tournament on the last day of September, to wind up the season with a flourish of trumpets. With the prospect of that, and the semi-weekly excitement of the Ambulance Lectures, the summer was passing fast, in an unusually eventful manner ; and probably more than one person concerned found it uncommonly pleasant.

The lectures had been informal things, of Dr Emery's own devising ; but he thought well to have a more or less formal examination, and invited a hospital friend of his as examiner. Petronella and Sarah passed with flying colours, Petronella being especially commended for her beautiful bandaging ; but poor Milly failed to pass, and fretted herself almost ill with shame and remorse.

"It was the Poisons," she wailed. "I never could remember them !"

"Well, what *does* it matter ?" said Petronella : kind, affectionate, but also a little impatient. "You never were good at exams.—and this isn't like a school one, that really counts for anything. You've learnt all you wanted to, so that you will know what to do when your dirty children cut their arteries and burn themselves."

"He—Dr Emery—will think I wasn't interested and didn't try," sobbed Milly.

"He won't be so silly. If he is," said Petronella, "I'll just tell him how you slaved away at the book—*far* harder than Sarah and I did."

"Oh, no! Oh, *please* don't tell him!" cried out Milly, much fluttered.

"Why not?" said Petronella, staring at her blankly, and with a little irritation. She loved Milly dearly, but always with a touch of condescension, as a simple person not at all on a level with herself. If Milly ceased to be simple, it would be decidedly annoying. She preferred to have the monopoly of nerves in the household; it was her right divine, as the highly-strung literary temperament.

She was finding home life, with its emancipation from the regular routine of school hours, very interesting indeed. There was a pleasant sense of importance about having regular working-hours, like a man with a real profession. It was pleasant, too, to escape thereby from the household tasks which had always been uncongenial to her, whereas Milly frankly loved them. All things were undoubtedly ordered for the best. Petronella wrote peacefully for certain definite hours each day in the little back room that had been dedicated to her use, while Milly and her mother fussed happily over linen-cupboard and grocery-cupboard, over the darning of stockings, the cleaning of silver, the making of pastry. There was nothing that Mrs King could not do in her own house, and Milly was fast learning to be an equally good housewife.

It was a chance remark of a possibly jealous

girl-friend which set Petronella noticing that Dr Emery played twice with her for once that he played with Milly. Passing on from that discovery, her eyes once opened, she began to observe quite a number of interesting similar facts. He always walked beside her coming home from the tennis club, if it were possible. His frank eyes had a habit of watching her with quite open admiration. There woke suddenly in Petronella a feminine instinct that had hitherto lain dormant—half vanity, half something deeper and sweeter. She had always held herself aloof from the sentimental chatter of other girls, who talked in that fashion from sheer empty-headedness; *she* had something better to think about. The first faint call of her womanhood sounded in her ears, and it seemed to her very pleasant. She had always walked, with a certain lofty enjoyment, in an atmosphere of popularity; but here was something different, deeper, vastly more important. Everyone liked her, many loved her, not a few had singled her out for the passionate schoolgirl adoration that is technically known as a "rave." But now, that a man should be actually "in love" with her! Petronella, meditating in her little study, sat up straight in her chair, and her large eyes brightened. She felt that such a thing meant a great deal more to her than to the ordinary girl; for that matter, she invariably felt that what happened to her was of more importance than

what happened to anyone else. She had been unpleasantly conscious, of late, that the love-scenes in her stories lacked life and interest. Now this could be remedied ; now she could watch, take notes, study such a situation at her leisure, with infinite benefit to her Work. Needless to say, she had no idea of accepting Dr Emery ; she had no idea of marrying anyone for a great many years to come. Her own point of view was so dispassionate, that any suggestion of cruelty never occurred to her. Your ardent entomologist, having secured his beetle, probably never stops for a moment to consider whether it has any personal objection to being put under the microscope. Petronella's code of ethics, which in its way was strict with a narrow, schoolgirlish rigidity, would never have permitted her—even for purposes of literary investigation—to “encourage” Dr Emery, to “lead him on,” certainly not to accept him without caring for him. But, if he chose to fall in love with her, of his own free will, she conceived herself entirely within her rights in watching the process minutely for her own ends. So her victim, never guessing himself to be, metaphorically speaking, on the dissecting table, played tennis with her, walked home with her, quite obviously sought her society whenever it was possible ; and Petronella, watching large-eyed, was kind and gracious. Her experiment was succeeding to admiration. She detected

already, in her present story, a flavour of reality in the love-scenes which had hitherto been lacking. She reproduced Dr Emery's looks and words with the utmost fidelity, as she wrote in her allotted morning hours ; and in the afternoons she went cheerfully forth to take fresh notes for the next morning's work.

September was waning fast, and the days grew noticeably shorter.

"I can't think," said Sarah, in her pungent way, "why your precious tournament is put off so late. You'll have to start at some ridiculous hour ; the light's gone now by six.—Who's your partner, Milly ?"

"I—I don't know yet," said Milly, a little falteringly.

"And Nella's ?"

"I—I don't think she's settled, either," said Milly, faltering still more.

Petronella came in with her racquet in her hand, and a charming colour in her face. It had been a most satisfactory afternoon. She had played particularly well—of course with Dr Emery. Several people had commented favourably on her chances in the tournament. Coming home, he had said several things of quite a thrilling nature, such as would fit admirably into "Stella Carew's Ordeal."

"What a pity you stayed at home, Milly ! We've had some splendid setts," she cried.

"*Why* did you stay at home?" said Sarah, turning sharply upon Milly.

"I—I thought I'd rather, to-day," said Milly, faltering still. Her eyes, looking past Sarah at Petronella, were a little pathetic. It could no longer be doubted that her pretty face was not so round as it used to be.

"Well, it seems a pity to miss a day's practice, with the tournament so near," said Petronella. "By the way, why did you refuse to play with Basil Cray? He's the best player in the club."

"Has he asked you now, then, as he can't have Milly?" said Sarah sharply.

Petronella nodded. She was busy putting her racquet into its press. She did not see the piteous, anxious eyes that were watching her.

"Then you're playing with him, of course?" said Sarah.

"Oh, no," said Petronella. "I'm playing with Dr Emery."

"I—I've got to go and see to something about supper," said Milly; and went hastily and quietly from the room.

The moment the door had closed upon her, Sarah turned upon Petronella. Her face was pale; her little bright eyes seemed to have turned pale also.

"Don't you really care a straw for Milly, after all?" she said fiercely.

"For Milly? For *Milly*?" Petronella stared,

bewildered. "What do you mean, Sarah? You know perfectly well that, after mother, of course, I love Milly better than anyone in the world!"

"You're not in love with Dr Emery, then?" Sarah cried sharply.

Petronella's colour deepened, and her eyes flashed. "Certainly not, Sarah—but you have no possible right to ask me anything about it!"

"I knew you were not in love with him. It's all just vanity, then. Nella, I'm heartily ashamed of you!" Sarah panted out the words furiously. "You let the man dangle round you, and you lead him on——"

"I don't—I *don't*!" Petronella exclaimed indignantly. "I do nothing of the sort—I treat him just as I would anybody else! If he—if he is inclined to be silly, it's not *my* fault."

"You could have stopped him like a shot at the very beginning, if you had chosen—you know that perfectly well!" Sarah stormed. "But I don't care a straw about *him*; he's nothing to me, either way.—You're breaking Milly's heart, and you don't see, or care!"

"Breaking Milly's heart!"

Petronella was white enough now, looking fairly stunned.

"Don't tell me you never thought of such a thing. You *ought* to have thought of it!" Sarah raged on. "Haven't you seen the poor goose getting paler and thinner and quieter every week?"

Haven't you seen her looking at him, when she thought no one saw?—or do you *never* see one inch beyond yourself and your wretched scribbling, Nella? Don't you know why she wouldn't go to the Club to-day?—because she couldn't bear to see him everlastingly hanging round you, with no eyes for anyone else! If you wanted him for yourself, I wouldn't have said a word; that's fair enough. But you *don't* want him. Why must you take him away from her, then?"

"I didn't—I don't—— Let me go to her, and explain!" said Petronella.

"And rob the poor thing of her self-respect—the only thing she's got left!" said Sarah, standing with her back to the door. "Let her at least go on thinking that nobody knows! It'll be hard enough for her to see him playing with you in the tournament——"

"I won't play in it," said Petronella, with tears in her eyes.

"Then you'll give the whole thing away. What excuse will you make to him, or to her either?"

"I *won't* play," Petronella repeated, with a quick glance round the room.

There was a vase of autumn roses standing on the mantelpiece. She put up her hand and knocked it down, so that it fell and smashed on the hearth-stone. Stooping, she snatched up a

couple of the fragments, and clenched her hand on them.

"Nella, are you mad?" cried Sarah, springing forward.

"I can't play in the tournament now, if I want to," said Petronella. "Stop the bleeding, please, Sarah; it's making me feel rather sick.—What a blessing that you went to the Ambulance Lectures!"

CHAPTER V

A BURNT CHILD

MILLY, coming hastily in at sound of the crash of glass, found Sarah gripping the wrist of a very white Petronella, with a scientific thumb pressed well in. Flying next door, she summoned Dr Emery in hot haste and terror; and Petronella had very nearly defeated her own ends once for all in the most complete fashion, by precipitating the proposal which it was now her greatest desire to avoid—for Dr Emery, coming flying in answer to the call, was almost as white as his patient, and made no attempt to conceal his personal interest and alarm over what was, after all, only a rather badly cut hand. Petronella, recognising that the situation was critical, and that this was no time for fainting, pulled herself together and laughed—very creditably, if rather feebly.

"You'll have to find another partner for the tournament," she said.

"I don't want to play with anyone but you," said Dr Emery recklessly.

They happened to be alone for a moment,

while Sarah and Mrs King and Milly ran in different directions to fetch remedies for the wounded damsel. His tone and manner were admirably adapted to the most sentimental of Petronella's heroes ; but she had something else to think of, at that moment, than the making of literary notes.

"Oh, what nonsense !" she said hastily. "You can play with Milly—I don't think she has a partner yet ; and she plays far better than I do, you know."

"I don't know anything of the sort," said Dr Emery ; and perhaps he was sufficiently infatuated to believe that he spoke the truth.

"Nonsense !" said Petronella again. "You must play with someone——"

"I don't want to play at all, now," said Dr Emery, securing a bandage with extraordinary care.

"You'll be very foolish if you don't ask Milly," said Petronella, frowning at him.

"If *you* wish it, I will," said Dr Emery.

Petronella hesitated, and then said firmly : "Yes, I do, please." It was perhaps rash to let him think that she wished in any way to assume control of his doings ; but, like a true Jesuit, she felt that in this instance the end justified the means.

"Oh, Nella, dear, you won't be able to play in the tournament !" said Milly distressfully, as

she brushed out her sister's hair that night. "Oh, I *am* sorry!—and Dr Emery will be so disappointed!" She did not meet Petronella's eyes in the glass; but she contrived to speak very naturally and unaffectedly.

"He'll have to find someone else—you, if he has any sense," said Petronella.

"Wouldn't you mind—if he asked me, and I did?" said Milly timidly.

"*Mind?* Why should I? I should be delighted!" said Petronella. "I'm very sorry to be out of the tournament myself; but I don't mind in the least who is your partner, so long as it is someone you would like playing with."

"You won't be able to write, either," said Sarah, sitting on Milly's bed for a farewell chat before going home.

Petronella looked dismayed. She had forgotten, in her zeal to make things right for Milly, that her self-sacrifice would be of quite such large dimensions.

"Never mind—you can dictate to me as much as you like. It's a good thing I learnt shorthand," said Sarah quickly.

"I don't know any shorthand," said Milly, in her gentle and humble way. "But I'll write for you all day long, Nella dear, if you like. I *am* so sorry for you."

Petronella accepted those offers graciously; but, in practice, the result was not a success. Her ideas

did not flow nearly so easily as when she had the pen in her own hand ; dictated, her stories sounded a little thin and bald, even to herself. After one or two attempts of varying unsuccess, she decided to take a rest until her hand was well again ; perhaps, as a matter of fact, she was a little distracted by the realities of life, and by the difficulty of discarding Dr Emery, who did not wish to be discarded. True, he had obediently invited Milly to play with him in the tournament, and was practising with her every day ; but it was still Petronella whom he sought at every available moment, by her side that he walked home whenever possible, to her that he looked for applause when he had played particularly well. It occurred to her, with an unpleasant shock, that he might be reckoning this playing with Milly as only a proof of allegiance to the commands of Milly's sister. It was clear that some decisive step must be taken, if the final disaster of a proposal were to be avoided ; and Petronella began to cast about for this in her own mind with some perturbation. Encouragement had been so fatally easy. Discouragement proved not to be easy at all.

The tournament day came. Milly had never played better in her life—which was saying a good deal,—and she and her partner won. But it was to Petronella, sitting watching with the elder women in the shade, that Dr Emery came at the first possible moment for applause and appreciation,

as a knight would have gone to his lady in days of old ; and there were scarcely suppressed smiles among Petronella's neighbours, and ostentatious turnings away, so that the two might say what they pleased to each other without listeners. Poor Milly's pretty face, so flushed a moment ago with the joy of victory, turned all of a sudden pathetically white ; and Petronella, seeing, hated herself. It was quite evident that the decisive step must be taken immediately ; a detestable task, for she liked Dr Emery, and had no wish to hurt him. But it had to be done. Milly was more to her than all the world of men lumped together.

Walking home together in the usual fashion, Milly fell dully behind with Sarah, leaving the other two to go on in front. The tournament had dragged on to a hotly contested finish, until there was scarcely any light to play by. It was gloaming now—the gloaming of a warm, belated summer day, a dangerous time for confidences ; and Dr Emery walked very close to Petronella. "If only you had been able to play !" said he. "You don't know—or do you know?—how much difference it would have made to me !"

"I think you're very ungrateful," said Petronella: and if his voice had been suggestively lowered, hers was a little higher and clearer than usual. "You certainly wouldn't have won with me !"

"I'd rather lose with you than win with anyone else in the world," said Dr Emery.

Petronella decided not to hear that. Her heart had begun to beat fast ; she felt that she was walking on very thin ice. She went on rather hastily, in her most matter-of-fact tone.

"If somebody had to be out of the tournament, it was a good thing that I was the one," she said.

"Why?" Dr Emery's question was explosive.

"Well, because that sort of thing doesn't really mean so much to me as to most girls," Petronella explained, with a calmness which she was far from feeling. "You see, my Work is a great deal to me. I am really fonder of it than of anything or anybody in the world—except my mother, of course, and Milly and Sarah, who is just like another sister."

"Yes, but—but you won't think so always," said Dr Emery in an odd hoarse voice.

Petronella was frightened ; but she looked him straight in the face with her clear eyes, and took the bull by the horns with considerable courage. "You mean if I were to marry? Yes, but I shan't do that for a great many years—perhaps never. Certainly not unless I meet the right man ; and I'm quite sure I haven't met him yet."

"Are you—quite sure?" The voice was not like Dr Emery's at all. Even in the gathering dusk Petronella could see that he was very pale.

"Yes—*certain*!" Petronella's reply was as decided as she could make it ; but it had of

necessity to be short, for she so pitied him, and so detested her own rôle, that she had all the difficulty in the world to keep her voice from shaking—and that, instinct told her, would probably have ruined everything. The effort made it ring out with a clearness and hardness which would have discouraged the boldest suitor.

“I—see,” said Dr Emery ; and said nothing more all the rest of the way home. It was the most unpleasant walk that Petronella had ever taken in her life. She made a strenuous resolution that she would never again allow herself to be placed in such a thoroughly disagreeable position.

Fortunately a distracted messenger was ringing Dr Emery’s bell so violently, when they reached the corner of the terrace, that there was no vexed question of asking him into supper ; the excuse was amply sufficient for pale Milly, for watchful Sarah, for Mrs King, waiting eagerly to hear the result of the tournament. Petronella, going up to her room with a sigh of intense relief, was thankful that the worst part of her task was over ; though perhaps the most difficult part was yet to come. She had effectually detached Dr Emery from his pursuit of herself ; but that was of comparatively little use unless he could be induced to turn to Milly instead. He might never care to come to Clematis Cottage again. He might—horrible thought—fall at once a victim to some other girl altogether ; “Caught in the Rebound,”

Petronella thought distractedly to herself, borrowing the title of her latest story. There were plenty of girls who had looked upon him with a kindly eye—Alice Darnell, who could sing like a lark ; Phyllis Cary, who was reckoned a beauty. "Oh !" cried Petronella to herself, taking out hatpins awkwardly with her bandaged hand, "what a pity things can't be comfortably settled as one likes in real life, as they can in books !"

Time soon proved, however, that she was spared the most inconvenient of possible developments. For a day or two, indeed, Dr Emery gave up visiting his next-door neighbours ; but he speedily fell again into the pleasant habit of dropping in nearly every day. Perhaps Petronella had nipped his devotion in the bud at a critical point, just before it had fully blossomed ; perhaps the light buoyancy of the young man's nature did not permit of any very lengthy depression. It was certain that he had grown to depend very much upon Mrs King for advice and help and encouragement. As to his intercourse with the girls, that had automatically lessened with the end of the tennis season ; there was now no more question of whom he would choose for a partner, no preference to be shown for the company of one or another during the walk home. His practice, too, was improving. "I always knew it would !" he cried optimistically. People who found him pleasant were disposed to find him able ; and his

time hung less and less on his hands. All these things, therefore, combined to console him very rapidly for his disappointment. He still admired Petronella very much ; but—being a modest young fellow—he was at no loss for an explanation of his want of success with her. “I’m not clever enough for her,” he confessed humbly to himself ; and was probably not in the least aware how quickly the phrase passed into another, of similar sound but widely different tone : “She’s too clever for me.” By the time that he had arrived at that point of view, it may fairly be surmised that he was well on the way to complete recovery. It remained to be seen if the place temporarily held by Petronella would be filled by anyone else : or whether Dr Emery, once bit, would prove twice shy. Petronella, with the best will in the world, was powerless to give Milly any help except the negative help which she had already given ; and Milly was the last girl to lift a finger for herself in such a crisis.

“If he can’t see for himself what a perfect darling she is, and what a splendid wife she would make,” cried Petronella to herself, with tears of vexation in her eyes, “he is an idiot !”

The autumn months, and then the early winter months, slipped by in a pleasant, uneventful fashion ; and Petronella proved her claim to genius by the unremitting pains which she took over her Work. She sat for hours every day,

writing and re-writing, posting her stories off to one editor after another, and duly receiving them back, after a long or short pause, in the stamped envelopes which she enclosed for that purpose. She never confessed how much of her pocket-money went in stamps. She ran downstairs regularly every morning, half-dressed, to empty the letter-box when the postman's knock sounded, so that no one should be witness to the number of unwelcome long envelopes—for, though she was perfectly frank about her stories themselves, and quite willing to have them read by her friends, she was too proud to own to their many unprofitable journeyings. Sometimes, when a manuscript stayed away longer than usual, her hopes ran very high ; and the disappointment was correspondingly bitter when they were dashed to the ground. She learnt to know quite well which magazines kept manuscripts for three days, and which kept them a month, and which never returned them at all until she wrote to inquire after them ; she could have told unerringly who were the editors who pleaded want of space, who were overwhelmed with the number of MSS. already in hand, who merely sent their compliments on a slip of paper, with no excuse at all. When facetious, kindly friends said to her "Well, Nella, and when are we to get your great book from the library?" she found it hard work to preserve a calm countenance and reply with a smile. Her mother and Milly

were unflagging adherents, admiring without discrimination everything that she wrote. Sarah, reading all with the keenest attention, was bold enough to offer one or two criticisms ; but, perceiving that Petronella did not like them, she gave up the unthankful office instantly. She it was who suggested the purchase of a typewriter, as a means of softening the hardness of editorial hearts ; and Petronella, first binding her over never to mention the subject again until the machine was bought—for she knew quite well that her mother and Milly would have eaten dry bread for a year in order to make the purchase, had it occurred to them—rigidly denied herself every sort of luxury until she could afford to buy one out of her own savings.

“But you should have told us you needed one, Nella, dear !” said Mrs King, aghast, when the situation revealed itself to her. “I would have seen that you had one long ago !”

“I know you would,” said Petronella, with a little smile of triumph, as she contemplated her new possession. She never confessed how much it had cost. She hid proudly, even from Milly, the extreme scantiness of her wardrobe and the straits to which she had been put. She was a Professional Woman, and she intended to play her part like a man. But she was not in the least an ascetic by nature ; and, on receipt of her next allowance, she made haste to go out and spend

five shillings of it on different kinds of chocolate—for Petronella had preserved the sweet tooth of her babyhood, and that part of her self-denial had been by no means one of the easiest. She was still nothing but a schoolgirl; and it had come very hard on her to refuse either to buy sweets or to accept them from other people—since she was too proud to take what she could not return. Even harder than that had been various mild taunts and suppositions that she was going in for Banting. In short, Petronella was discovering, even thus early in her career, that the way of the literary aspirant, however glorious its goal, is strewn with remarkably sharp thorns in its earlier stages.

She learnt very quickly to type with rapidity and accuracy; and, with new enthusiasm, she copied out every one of her manuscripts and sent them forth on fresh voyages—and lo! they one and all returned to her as faithfully as before. Petronella was a little daunted; but not for long. With a rather grim expression, she locked away the much-travelled stories in a drawer, and sat down to write new ones. She would have her revenge some day, when anxious editors were writing to her by every post, crying out for copy, and she would graciously send them the identical stories which they now rejected with contumely. To this end—and also because she had inherited something of her mother's business capacity—she kept

a beautifully neat little manuscript book, in which she entered faithfully the name of each tale, its length, and a dated list of the magazines to which it had been submitted. The book, at present, was depressing reading; but Petronella looked forward hopefully to a future when every page should end in a vivid line of red ink, and the agreeable word "Accepted."

She had great theories—most girls have—on the subject of exercise. In that benighted age, when hockey was only just beginning to thrust a tentative stick into the more advanced girls' schools, and bicycling was considered rather unladylike, people still walked; and Milly and Petronella were great walkers, especially in the winter, when there was no tennis to be had. The country round was very pretty, though hilly from a pedestrian's point of view—so hilly that six or seven miles counted as quite a long walk. Within their radius, the girls knew the neighbourhood intimately—knew where the first primroses might be found in spring, the best wild roses in June, the largest blackberries in autumn, the finest holly at Christmas-time. Sarah, who had no love for walking for its own sake, went with them sometimes; but she was a rather trying companion, since her method of progression was a series of darts to right or left, whenever her sharp eyes caught sight of something that she wished to add to her many collections.

"But it spoils flowers so, to press them in a book!" protested Milly, whose tender heart could not bear to see even wayside weeds treated ungently.

"They aren't so pretty to look at, I own; but it's the only way to learn about them properly," said Sarah, putting her latest specimen carefully between layers of blotting-paper.

Petronella looked on indulgently but rather loftily. There was no objection to Sarah's wasting her time in such a fashion, if she pleased; but it was quite outside her own province, and consequently of no particular interest.

On a certain magnificent spring day, she and Milly set out for a rather longer walk than usual, armed with a basket of grapes for one of Mrs King's innumerable sick protégées. Pleasant as walking was in itself, an object for a walk was always welcome; and the straggling village for which they were bound lay in a hollow of the Downs, so that the way there was of the pleasantest. Up and down the chalky roads they went briskly, with an occasional short-cut over the crisp, springy turf, dried by March winds and not yet moistened by April showers. A soft breeze fluttered the ribbons on Petronella's hat and loosened the soft wavy hair round Milly's forehead, bringing with it a pleasant salt tang from the sea that lay sparkling, diamond-bright, in the distance. The sky was of that pale delicious blue that faintly fore-

shadows what its colour will be presently when summer comes.

"What a perfect day ! Let's sit down a minute," said Petronella, flinging herself on the grass.

Milly sat down too, with instant obedience : but carefully, for she was carrying the basket.

"I wish we lived up here, instead of down in the town," said Petronella, clasping her knees. "The air is so lovely ; one seems able to breathe better, and think better."

Milly considered this conscientiously—agreeing, of course, as far as was possible. "It *is* lovely up here," she said. "But it is a long way from the shops—I don't suppose any of the tradespeople would deliver so far away ; and that would be very awkward."

Petronella looked at her and laughed—loftily, but very affectionately. It was quite useless to expect high-falutin from Milly ; but it was not even desirable—since Petronella liked to have continual evidence of her own superiority.

"Besides," Milly continued seriously, "there are no houses to be had up here—houses that we could live in, I mean : nothing at all but those cottages where we are going."

"I didn't really mean to propose moving up here," Petronella explained gently. "I only thought that one might be better, and happier, in this glorious air, and away from the stupid little petty things that one can't avoid in a town."

"The people in the cottages, who do live up here, are all *very* dirty," said Milly.

Petronella laughed again, and gave up the matter as a bad job. She was just about to suggest that they had better move on, when a sudden shrill scream brought them both to their feet in a flash.

"Someone's hurt," said Petronella.

"It's a child," said Milly ; and began to run.

The screams, which continued and were appalling, came without doubt from the nearest cottage of the untidy little group. It looked very dirty. But Milly had gone in, and Petronella followed.

The appearance of dirt outside was nothing, compared with the reality of dirt within ; and this was increased, paradoxically, by the obvious fact that it was washing-day. Clouds of sour steam filled the air, adding to the already existing collection of unsavoury odours which offended Petronella's nostrils ; a heap of wet, discoloured, ragged clothes lay on the table. Such furniture as there was, was clammy as well as grimy : a loathsome combination. Standing by the fire was a short, slatternly woman holding a bundle, which screamed and writhed incessantly. A waft of some smell, more obnoxious than all the rest, made Petronella speak out sharply.

"Something's burning !" she cried ; and then suddenly stopped, feeling sick. It was the bundle that was burnt ; and the bundle was a child.

The woman kept on repeating, in a thick, dull voice: "I *told* 'er not to go near the fire—I told 'er not——"

"Give the child to me," said Petronella. "I know what to do." She tried with all her might to put aside her disgust. What was the good of having attended Ambulance Lectures, if one had not one's wits about one at the critical moment? She took hold of the child, which screamed and writhed afresh at her touch. It was a very little child, with tangled yellow curls over its forehead. At the back they were blackened and charred—Petronella felt very sick indeed.

"Get me some salad oil, and lint, and bandages!" she cried sharply. "Quick!—as quick as you can!"

The woman stared at her stupidly. Petronella suddenly perceived that she was half drunk. "We ain't got any o' they things, miss," she said, with a hiccough.

Petronella looked round her in despair; and the child, which had lain quiet for a minute in a sort of stupor, suddenly struggled in her arms with a piercing shriek. It was taken from her, and she found herself pushed aside without ceremony. "Scissors, quick—and some flour!" cried Milly. "Nella, get me the cotton-wool that's round the grapes!"

Petronella succeeded, rather shakily, in complying with this demand; and then subsided on to one of the dirty chairs, feeling that she could not

stand for another moment : nearer, in fact, to fainting ignominiously than she had ever been in all her healthy life. With vague astonishment she watched Milly—usually so placid, so deliberate of movement—working with fingers that were as rapid as they were steady and gentle. She was slitting down the seams of the horribly dirty little garments, sprinkling flour with a lavish hand, talking incessantly as she worked in a murmuring, soothing fashion which seemed to have an almost hypnotic effect ; for the screams died down into moans, and then ceased altogether. Over the layer of flour Milly laid her cotton-wool, and then bound the whole dressing lightly in place with strips torn recklessly from her own white petticoat. It was all done with extraordinary speed. They had scarcely been a quarter of an hour in the cottage when the last bandage was secured, and the child lying quietly without a sound.

"She must be put to bed. Where does she sleep?" Milly demanded firmly. "Has she a bed to herself?"

The woman stared, and then laughed in a maudlin fashion. "Lor, no, miss!" she cried. "She sleep with Albert and Evelyn Georgina, and little Rosabelle acrost the foot!"

"Then you must have her on the sofa here," said Milly decidedly, turning to a dilapidated old horsehair couch under the dirty window. "Have you any milk in the house? Put it

on to boil at once ! And give me two blankets, please."

The woman, just sober enough to resent being ordered about, began to grumble. "I ain't got but three blankets—I can't spare two of them for 'er——"

Milly—the gentle and timid Milly—turned on her, and stamped her foot. "Do as I tell you instantly !" she cried, in a voice that made the little room ring again. "Do you want her to die ? If she does—and I think it's more than likely, in any case—it will be *you* who have killed her !"

The woman, cowed and whimpering, obeyed abjectly : pouring milk with a shaking hand from a dirty jug into a dirtier saucepan, producing two blankets from the very sight of which Petronella turned, nauseated. But Milly, handling them unflinchingly, heated them at the fire, moved the child to the sofa, and wrapped her up with a wonderful deft gentleness : her voice dropping to a tender croon that brought quick, inexplicable tears to Petronella's eyes.

"Nella, I saw some loose bricks lying about outside. Fetch a couple, and put them on the hob, please," said Milly, not looking up.—"There, there, darling, don't cry ! It will soon be better."

"Bricks ?" Petronella stammered, uncomprehending.

"To put at her feet—better than nothing, as there's, of course, no sort of hot-water bottle to be

had," said Milly : speaking impatiently, for the first time in her life, to her adored sister. And Petronella, like the woman of the house, obeyed at once with meekness.

The poor baby, warmed and eased, lay staring up into Milly's face as she fed it with spoonfuls of hot milk : finally put out a feeble claw of a hand and closed it round one of her fingers, while the big eyes closed drowsily. Milly was kneeling, not too comfortably, by the sofa, with one hand under the pillow. She did not move.

"She's asleep," whispered Petronella. "Come away now."

Milly shook her head. "I can't. It would disturb her," she said, under her breath.

"Can I do anything more?"

"No—only just move a chair so that I can rest my elbow on it. Thank you."

"I'll take the grapes on to Mrs Nuttall, and come back for you," said Petronella. There was no need for both of them to linger in that disgusting atmosphere.

But she did not go back. For, returning from her errand, she saw a bicycle whirling madly up the road ; and Dr Emery, flinging himself off it, dashed into the cottage. Petronella had no mind to meet him just then. She was in a state of humiliation and astonishment which was very disconcerting. She set off, at a brisk pace, over the Downs in the direction of home.

Milly, kneeling by the sofa, raised a white and strained face. "I did the best I could," she murmured humbly. "I wasted a minute, I'm afraid, finding someone to send for you. Of course I had to use just what there was in the house."

"You can move your arm now," said Dr Emery briefly, slipping his hand into the place where hers had been for so long. Milly obeyed with difficulty, for the arm was quite cold and numb. She rose stiffly to her feet, biting her lips to prevent herself from crying out with the pain.

"Can I do anything else?" she asked meekly.

"Yes, please wait," said Dr Emery; and then took no further notice of her.

Milly stood, rather pale, by the door; it seemed to her for a long time. She saw Dr Emery make his careful examination, heard him put a few sharp questions to the mother: who was now completely sober, and very much frightened.

"Now, Miss King!" he said at last; and Milly walked in front of him out of the cottage. "Are you fit to walk home?"

"Of course!" said Milly, much surprised. The fresh air was a great relief, and had revived her at once.

"I suppose you know that you saved the child's life?" said Dr Emery abruptly.

"I'm very glad to have been of any use," faltered Milly. "I'm afraid I did it all very badly—but I had to use just what there was——"

"You don't usually have a hospital at hand when accidents happen," said Dr Emery.

"No," said Milly, very meekly.

She was still pale, and—to her consternation, had she but known it—anything but tidy: her hair ruffled, her hat crooked, her skirt dusted with flour and stained with milk. But to Dr Emery, looking at her, there came suddenly a series of visions, such as Petronella in her vexation had tried in vain to make him see—visions of domestic Milly, busy about the house or sewing daintily by the drawing-room fire: of Milly playing tennis, always most modest about her own successes and much impressed by those of other people: of Milly always a little in the background, always busy, always kind and gentle. A magic influence took him as it were by the shoulders, and shook out of him words which, an hour before, he had certainly never dreamt of saying.

"Miss King—Milly——"

Milly looked up: surprised, blushing, a good deal startled.

"Milly, I love you—and I can't think why I didn't find it out long ago!" said Dr Emery.

CHAPTER VI

"THE HOT TAP"

MILLY's engagement gave Petronella a taste of a new and surprising sensation—for the first time in her life she found herself playing second fiddle to her sister. She accepted the position with a very good grace, but with much private astonishment. Why should the mere fact of being engaged make Milly rank in all eyes as a person of importance? Why should Mrs King, besides being almost tearfully delighted, instantly exalt her elder daughter to a pinnacle? Milly's future was now, of course, comfortably settled; but *that* could not be the reason, since in any case she and Petronella would always possess a sufficient income. Certainly she would be much missed at home, even though she would go no farther than next door; why, then, should her mother be so greatly gratified at the prospect? Petronella comprehended easily enough that there should be excitement and not a little jealousy amongst their friends, since it had always been quite evident that many a young damsel cast a

favourable eye upon Dr Emery ; but the stings that underlay certain honeyed congratulations seemed powerless to hurt Milly, wrapped up as she was in a mantle of bliss. She sat smiling and sewing, putting her daintiest stitches into the most uninteresting of long seams, which were transformed by magic into sheer delights, because they were to form part of her trousseau. Things that she had formerly loved became as dust in the balance, compared with five minutes of her Wilfred's society. She did not care to go to the most fascinating picnic, if he could not be there. She gave up tennis almost entirely, because he had now very little time to play. It appeared that no possible delight of girlhood could compare for a moment in her eyes with half an hour alone with him. Petronella watched and marvelled. She had never before had an engaged couple to study at close quarters ; and Milly, as the lay-figure of a fiancée, offered unbounded scope for observation. Petronella came to the conclusion that there were two kinds of girls in the world—the girls who wanted to marry, and those who did not ; and that she herself belonged indubitably to the latter class. She liked her future brother-in-law very much indeed ; but she could not imagine elevating him, or any other man, on a pedestal of pure gold, and then falling down and worshipping in Milly's fashion. When that deluded young

person said to her, with actual tears in her eyes, "Oh, Nella, I do hope you will some day soon be as happy as I am!" Petronella kissed her very kindly; but inwardly she smiled superior. It was presumably quite pleasant to be engaged, to wear a beautiful new ring on your left hand, to be a person of consequence whom everyone congratulated: even very pleasant to have a handsome and agreeable young man always dancing attendance on you, giving you presents, looking at you as if he could not see anyone else in the room. But how could all this compare for an instant with the pride and joy of the author who had written a book? Petronella, smiling again, betook herself to her study, and wrote with redoubled diligence.

Perhaps, unconsciously to herself—for she was genuinely and generously sympathetic in Milly's joy—she felt a little hurt that Dr Emery should so soon and so completely have forgotten his fancy for herself. She would not for the world have had Milly know of that; and this engagement was what she had schemed and hoped for with all her might. Nevertheless, it was not flattering that he should accept her so very frankly as a sister, obviously without a single thought of what had passed between them. Petronella, generalising in the accustomed way of sweet-and-twenty, made a mental note that the love of man is a light thing compared with the love of

woman ; and plumed herself mightily on her acuteness in making that discovery.

However glad she might be for Milly, it was inevitable that she should find herself a little out in the cold. They had always done everything together. Milly timed her house-work to fit in with Petronella's hours of writing, so that she might always be at her beck and call ; whatever was wanted, she was always to be relied on. Now everything hung on Wilfred—whether she was going out with him, whether he was coming to tea, whether he would have time to come in after dinner. Even when he was fairly out of the way, and there was not even any possibility of meeting him, it was no longer the old Milly who went out walking with Petronella over the Downs ; it was an absorbed person, who smiled vaguely to herself as she walked, who had only half her attention to give to any subject but the One. The very foundations of the world seemed tottering, now that reliable Milly was no longer to be depended on. Petronella, recovering a little from the first shock of surprise, generalised again with as much philosophy as she could muster. She learnt that even the dearest of people may change, until they are almost unrecognisable. She turned, disillusioned, to the true and tried friends of the world of books—to Major Dobbin, to Colonel Newcome and Ethel, to Shirley, to Elizabeth

Bennet ; they, at least, could never change. Her Work magnified itself, if that were possible, in her eyes ; but it was borne in upon her afresh that the great ones of literature stood far off on shining mountain heights, and that she herself had not as yet succeeded in even beginning her ascent of the foothills. It was perhaps in the nature of things that at this juncture all her newest manuscripts returned to her simultaneously, by one fatal evening post. Mrs King was lying down in the drawing-room with a headache, glad to have the lights lowered. Milly and her Wilfred were immured in the dining-room. It was the little maid's evening out ; and Petronella, greatly condescending, had volunteered to lay the supper. She sat in the kitchen, with her stories strewn about her, and felt that the world was a depressing place. So very greatly chastened, indeed, were her spirits, that she felt actual tears of mortification pricking in her eyes. That would never do—not for worlds would she confess what was the matter ! She snatched up for distraction a little cheap feminine paper belonging to the servant, and fluttered the pages at random. It served its purpose, since any sort of printed matter had its fascination for Petronella. It did more than that ; for she found, near the beginning, "This Week's Prize Story," and the name and address of the lucky amateur who had won the allotted guinea.

Petronella, flushing suddenly, skimmed with eager eyes through the prize-winning two thousand words. She could do better than that—oh, vastly better than that! Only amateurs were allowed to compete: the humble folk who had never yet tasted the bliss of seeing themselves in print. Surely this was that very bottom rung of the ladder where she had vowed to begin her career.

Oblivious of supper and every other consideration, she flew to her study and hurriedly turned out every manuscript in her possession, including those that had been relegated in disgrace to the lowest drawer; and amongst these she found one of the requisite length—one of her less ambitious efforts, bearing the modest title, *Agatha's Story*. It related very simply how a girl sent in a tale for a competition and won a prize for it, thereby relieving her debt-ridden father from a very critical position. Petronella had never had any great opinion of the story; but the coincidence of its subject seemed a good omen, and she had no other of just the right length. She hastily enclosed it in an envelope, and ran out then and there to post it.

"Is supper ready, Nella?" asked Mrs King, appearing at the drawing-room door when she came in again.

"Supper? Oh—I forgot all about it!" said Petronella blankly.

She had fairly earned the teasing that fell to her share ; for Milly's engagement was by this time of some months' standing, and Wilfred had dropped quite naturally into the position of son of the house, and treated Petronella frankly as a sister. She bore his jibes, his references to "our Authoress" and the absent-mindedness of genius, with good humour ; and went quite meekly with Milly to lay the neglected table ; but it occurred to her afresh as astonishing that Milly could regard that kind and pleasant young man with such adoring eyes, could evidently consider his little household jests as the acme of wit, could treasure every word that he said as pure gold. Certainly, there was an impassable barrier between the girls who were intended to marry and those who had something better to do.

Like all amateurs, Petronella had the very vaguest notion as to the time necessary for producing anything in print. She betook herself to the station in due course to buy a copy of next week's *Home Chirps*, and was bitterly disappointed to find that the prize-winning story was not hers. She was terribly cast down by this blow ; but by good luck, turning over the pages, she happened on a notice from the Editress ("Aunt Dulcibel's Answers to her Friends"), stating firmly that no question could by any possibility be answered in less than three weeks. At that, Petronella plucked up heart again, reproved her-

self for her foolish ignorance, and pigeon-holed the fact in her memory for future reference. If correspondents could not be answered in less than three weeks, it might be even as much as a month before tales sent in for competition could be examined and judged. In the meantime—since it would be well to let no possible chance slip—she would take the precaution of buying *Home Chirps* steadily each week, lest she might by ill fortune miss that all-important number which was to contain her own contribution. She made these discoveries and resolutions in the station waiting-room, where she had retired to examine the little paper at leisure, and she left it there on purpose : too proud to take it home, and give Mrs King and Milly the chance of guessing at her latest literary effort.

The weeks ran by—four of them—and still *Agatha's Story*, with the author's name proudly attached, never figured on Page Two. Petronella began to be filled with bitter thoughts : to wonder sceptically if, supposing anyone to be energetic enough to investigate, the real name of each prize-winner would not prove to be Mrs Harris. She had some faint idea of writing herself to make inquiries—since names and addresses were always given ; but pride and shyness forbade. She read every week, with a minute and savage criticism, the story that did actually win the coveted guinea ; and they all appeared to her poor, badly written,

sometimes even ungrammatical—infinately inferior, she was sure, to her own production. There were moments when, rating herself high, she felt that *Agatha's Story* was too good to succeed. There were other moments when she imagined it lost in the post, overlooked on the editor's table, thrown away by mistake with some other contribution that had been adjudged worthless. The heights and depths of Petronella's hopes and fears, the amount of time which she spent in speculations regarding the fate—past, present, and future—of her trivial manuscript, would appear incredible to anyone who has not passed through the literary mill. She was taking it more to heart than any of her other attempts. It seemed to her that, having descended to the very bottom of the ladder at last, she was once for all testing her ability to secure a foothold on the lowest rung.

There came a day when, flying downstairs as usual in the grey morning light at the postman's knock, her eyes dilated and her heart stood still ; for there in her hand, amongst other letters, was a too-familiar and wholly loathsome spectacle : a long envelope, addressed to herself in her own handwriting. She could not remember that at the moment she had any manuscripts—except the one that was all-important—on the road ; and yet—it could not be that ! With flying feet, and her heart thumping, Petronella leaped upstairs to her

bedroom again, and tore open the envelope as fast as shaking fingers would let her. She knew that there were such things as proofs. If this should be a proof—her first proof! Trembling, she at last succeeded in unfolding the enclosure; and *Agatha's Story*, considerably dirtier than when she had last seen it, stood confessed before her.

It fell from her hands to the floor; and she sat down on her bed with a desolated suddenness. She had been so confident this time, that the blow to her hopes was awful; and still worse was the blow to her vanity—she was not even good enough to win a trumpery prize in a trumpery little weekly paper amongst other amateurs. The iron had indeed entered into Petronella's soul; and she sat crouched on her bed, shrouded in a mourning veil of her long hair, staring out of the window at nothing with blank eyes in a very pale face. It was, of course, ridiculous to care so much for such a little thing—the mere rejection of a very small story by a very small editor; but to Petronella it stood for the downfall of all her hopes since her earliest childhood—the sign and symbol of her unworthiness to hold even the humblest position in the craft she had chosen. For you shall bray in a mortar—along with the fool and his folly—your newly-rejected lover and his broken heart, your small child and her broken doll, your gambler and his lost millions:

and out of all these you may express an essence of bitterness less bitter than that of the disillusioned author who sees himself written down a failure.

The ringing of the breakfast-bell roused her; and pride made her start up, and snatch from the ground the fallen manuscript—Milly would certainly come in soon to see why she was late. At the very bottom of a drawer, Petronella buried *Agatha's Story* and the envelope that had contained it—to be burnt later, when everyone was safely out of the way; and then had to open the drawer again, to hide also the hideously familiar printed slip that had fallen out of it. It was like burying a dead child, and knowing that one would never have another; for Petronella was fully determined to abandon the writing of fiction for evermore. No more cherished hopes for her, no more annihilating defeats. Henceforward she would live the life of the ordinary girl, to whom the day's trivial round was all-sufficing. Her world stretched blank before her, unutterably grey, immeasurably flat. She had suffered her last at the hands of unfeeling editors, she had received her last rejection-slip. She would force herself to look at it before putting it away—not shrinking like a coward from the final blow, but facing it open-eyed, and owning herself fairly defeated.

"The Editor regrets that he is unable to make

use of the enclosed contribution, for the kind offer of which he is much obliged."

It read with a horrible familiarity—how many times had not Petronella received the same, or its equivalent? But as she forced herself to look at it, her eye was caught suddenly by a novelty: something she had never seen in this connection before; a red-ink scrawl across one corner of the printed form. With a wildly beating heart, she made out what it said—not quickly, for it was villainously scribbled, and her eyes were dim with excitement and suspense.

"If you care to cut this down to 1800 words, I can accept it for *Marigolds*. Godfrey might be cut out altogether.—H. T."

If she cared to cut it down! At the moment Petronella would willingly have cut off her right hand for such a chance. She was thrilled through and through by the delightful touch of familiarity which referred to one of her own creations by his name; at that royal editorial command, she was prepared to sacrifice the unfortunate Godfrey without remorse or hesitation.

"Nella—Nella! Aren't you well?" Milly was calling at her door.

"I'll be down in five minutes. I—got hindered," Petronella called back, in a voice which she did not recognise as her own.

She plaited up her hair and finished dressing in feverish haste, as rapidly as her shaking fingers

would let her ; and she laughed out at her excited, white-faced reflection in the glass. Should she tell her mighty secret at breakfast-time ? or should she wait to let it burst upon her mother and Milly, in all its glory, when the story actually appeared in print ? By the time that she was ready, she had decided on the latter course. She went downstairs with her brain in a blissful whirl.

"Nella, dear, you're eating *nothing*," said Mrs King distressfully. "What is the matter ?"

"Nothing, thank you," said Petronella vaguely, helping herself to mustard with her marmalade. And Mrs King and Milly, observing that she seemed quite happy, though she neither heard what they were saying nor knew what she was eating, were tactful enough to leave her alone. She was often very much distraught when she was thinking out a story ; this was only an unusually severe attack of genius.

Breakfast over, Petronella flew to her study and immured herself there : first taking the precaution of telling Milly that she was going to have a very busy morning, and would be too much occupied for a walk. With entire ruthlessness, she tore her manuscript to pieces, and prepared it for sacrifice to the editorial Moloch : discovering incidentally that it is an easier and much pleasanter task to write a new tale than to cut down an old one. Lining out and writing in, typing and retyping, she finally reduced *Agatha's Story* to

the prescribed limits; and went out to post it immediately, with an aching head, a dazed brain, and a glorious sense of triumph.

"Nella, you've been working too hard," said Mrs King, looking at her heavy eyes with concern.

"It's all right. I've finished what I had to do," said Petronella. "I'll go for a long walk this afternoon, and blow away the cobwebs."

Milly, distressed, explained remorsefully that she could not come—she was going out with Wilfred. But Petronella was privately glad to hear that. The main object of her walk was the station, where she might buy the current copy of *Marigolds* and see for herself in what sort of company her first success was to see the light. So forth she sallied, with her head among the stars; and she bought her little paper—feeling as if the very bookstall boy must divine the reason and be impressed,—and read it from cover to cover through rose-coloured glasses. It was not, of course, comparable in any way with the magazines whose impregnable fortresses she had so long and so vainly attacked; it was perhaps a poor thing—but her own.

During the following weeks, she worked away with redoubled energy: writing fresh stories, cutting down old ones to the dimensions prescribed by *Marigolds*, sending them all forth on the great adventure with a heart beating high with renewed hope. The gods themselves cannot

take back their gifts. Whatever blows fate might yet have in store for her, she could fall back for comfort on her one small success. She had taken the costly first step; and she could wait with comparative patience for a chance of taking the next.

So there came at last a day when, buying *Marigolds* as usual at the station, she found on Page Two *Agatha's Story* as large as life, with her own name blatant in print at the end of it. Petronella's head swam; she turned red and white; she felt that the eyes of the bookstall boy were fixed inquisitively on her. Often as her fancy had dwelt on this, she found the reality a little overwhelming. The station waiting-room was not private enough for this sacred moment. She rushed away to the Downs, and set herself to read *Agatha's Story* from beginning to end—so well-known, and yet so oddly strange in the unfamiliarity of print. It read well—better than she had expected; but a mistake or two in punctuation made her flush with shame and dismay. It could not have been her own doing—some fiendish printer must have been responsible for that absurd note of exclamation, that meaningless semi-colon! Perhaps, however, the world in general—and especially her mother and Milly—might fail to see these terrible flaws. Petronella rose up and turned homewards, walking as if her feet went upon air.

They were both out—and that was rather a blow,

and not at all what she had painted to herself in fancy pictures. She had imagined herself walking in with composure, divulging the great news in an offhand manner, proffering her paper, watching the stupefaction and wonder and delight that would immediately ensue. As it was, she had to wait ; and that was never either congenial or easy to Petronella. She took up the newspaper—not that that interested her at all, in a general way ; but she was far too restless to settle down to any definite occupation, and this would do as well as anything else. There were reviews to-day, and some publishers' announcements ; and these she always studied attentively. As she turned to this page, something caught her eye which amused her very much—it would make them all laugh——

They were coming ; and Sarah with them, which was an added satisfaction. She was so much one of the family, that her interest would be as great as anyone's. Petronella sat waiting, flushed with pride and excitement, the paper in her hand and *Marigolds* on her lap. She would not blurt out the great news like a child, the moment they entered. Perhaps she would even let them tell first of their own little doings and shoppings ; from her earliest childhood, Petronella had always saved the plums in her pudding to the last. Mrs King had her purse in her hand, Milly had a bunch of flowers, Sarah carried a large, untidy parcel in brown paper : the sort of thing that no

one but Sarah, who was quite regardless of appearances, would carry at all.

"Oh, you're in first, Nella!" said Milly, who was apt to deal in pleasant platitudes.

"Anning & Bell will have to send for that ribbon. They had nothing that would match at all," said Mrs King.

Sarah, saying nothing, put down her parcel on the table as if it were heavy. Her bright, observant eyes fixed themselves on Petronella's face with keen scrutiny, seeming to read all that was written there; and Petronella, for the sheer joy of the thing, put off her moment of glory still a very little longer. She would make them all laugh first, with the odd coincidence that she had happened on in the paper.

"I thought *I* was the family authoress, Sarah!" she cried, in a voice that was high and a little unsteady. "I never thought that *you* would be the first to publish a book!"

"Sarah!—A book!" said Mrs King and Milly together. Their voices were exactly alike; so was the kind, bewildered glance which they turned simultaneously from Sarah to Petronella, who was running her finger down the columns of the paper in search of what she wanted.

"Look!" she cried, holding it up. "'*A novel by a new author: 'The Hot Tap': by Sarah Garnett!*'"

Mrs King and Milly again repeated her words

in unison, gazing with astonishment at Sarah. Petronella's eyes, looking at her too, were full of intense amusement.

"But—but Sarah doesn't write!" said Milly, stammering a little in her perplexity. She was never quick at seeing a joke, or understanding anything outside the ordinary happenings of daily life.

"That's just it," said the laughing Petronella.

Sarah looked at them all squarely, with one of her quick glances.

"Of course you're astonished; because that sort of thing has never been in my line before," she said.

Petronella stood up suddenly. She looked very tall, and her face was white; her large eyes opened and dilated until they seemed nearly twice their usual size.

"It's really true? *You* wrote this book?" she said in the oddest voice.

Sarah nodded.

"But *why* didn't you tell us?" cried Milly, breathless.

"Why should I?" said Sarah abruptly. "It's nothing so very wonderful—everyone writes books nowadays. The idea just came to me, and worried me so that I *had* to write it out. And then—we were very short of money, and I thought I'd try if anyone would take it. I was very much astonished when it was accepted—it's *queer*. I did

think of telling you all then ; and then I thought I might as well wait till it came out. I hate a fuss.—But I’m sorry you saw the announcement before I told you myself. I meant to come in at once as soon as these came ; but father burnt his hand rather badly, and I had to stay and bandage it up, and finish the experiment he was trying.”

She unfastened her parcel, and removed the careful packing of six books : beautiful in their newness and uniformity. Milly took one up, with timid fingers and an awed expression.

“Just fancy *you* having written all this !” she said. “Why, how did you find the *time* for it ?”

“You can always make time for a thing that you really want to do,” said Sarah.

Petronella drew near the table with her mother, looking, examining, but making no comment. She could not trust her voice. Her face had suddenly grown years older, strained and drawn as it might have been by illness. Fortunately for her, Mrs King and Milly had a thousand simple questions to ask. They looked at Sarah as if she had wrought a miracle. They had never quite realised before that the writers of books could walk among the other sons of men without having their calling visibly stamped on their foreheads. It was nothing short of astounding to them that Sarah should have managed all the

business part of the affair—to say nothing of the rest—in silence, and without help or advice from anyone. Her matter-of-fact replies, her assumption that she had behaved in a perfectly commonplace fashion throughout, at last stunned them into speechlessness.

"Well! I must go back to father," she said finally. "Would you care for a copy, Mrs King?" very abruptly.

"My dear, I should love it—if you can spare one."

"Spare one! Whom have I to give them to?" said Sarah, with one of her odd laughs. "Milly, will you have one—to take with you next door, when you go?"

"Oh, *please!*" said Milly, gratified and blushing.

"May I have one, Sarah?" said Petronella, very gently.

Sarah turned and looked her straight in the eyes. Her odd, ugly face softened and quivered queerly. "Who should have one, if not my greatest friend?" she said in her harshest voice.

"Thank you very much," said Petronella, and bent forward and kissed her—though Sarah was never fond of kissing. "You are wonderful, Sarah. I do congratulate you tremendously," she said.

"Nella, you've dropped something under the

table," said Milly, as they were all leaving the room.

"Only a silly little magazine—not worth reading," said Petronella. But she took it carefully away with her, shutting the study door behind her.

CHAPTER VII

MILLY'S WEDDING

SARAH had perhaps understated the truth in describing her book as "queer"; though queer it certainly was—as queer as its own title. Mrs King read it with so much horror that she found it quite difficult to find her ordinary kind comments to make about it; and it frightened Milly so much, that she came shivering to Petronella's room in the middle of the night, on the verge of tears, and refusing to sleep alone. A few reviewers condemned it root and branch for its gruesomeness; but the majority praised it sky-high, saying in chorus that nothing so good of its kind had appeared since *Dracula*. It caught the fancy of that large public which likes to be terrified; and went into its third edition before Christmas.

Petronella bore all this extremely well; though only herself knew what it cost her to read the book dispassionately, to talk about it calmly, to speak the words of praise which Sarah had fairly earned. It was even harder to face, un-

moved and smiling, the many people who said to her with astonishment: "But I thought it was *you* who were going to give us the book of the year, Nella!" She went very near to hating them—both those who wanted to see her wince, and those who merely spoke their tactless minds; but pride sustained her so well that she never once gave herself away. One battle, perhaps the hardest of all, she fought long, courageously, and at last victoriously—she would not allow herself to fancy that Sarah had not played the game. Sarah had always been as straight as a die; if the positions had been reversed, she would have been the first to applaud Petronella, without one thought of self. The literary field is open to all comers, and certainly Sarah had as good a right as anyone else to break a lance there—but no number of successful books could have reflected so much credit on a girl of Petronella's temperament as the fact that she forced herself to see and own this, and loved Sarah just as sincerely after her triumph as before.

Of course, before so very many days were past, she had told the secret of *Agatha's Story*—that poor secret, with all the bloom rubbed off it—and equally of course Mrs King and Milly were thrilled and enraptured beyond measure: since a modest achievement by your own flesh and blood is greater than all the triumphs of the dearest alien. By the time that a cheque for eighteen shillings

reached Petronella, she had recovered sufficiently to find a good deal of solid pleasure in the disbursing of it—on a stock of stamped envelopes (since every profession should be self-supporting), two huge chrysanthemums in pots for her mother (who loved flowers, and strenuously refrained from buying them), three embroidered handkerchiefs for Milly (who cared for nothing that could not form part of her trousseau), and a pound of superior chocolates for herself.

And now, as if in reward for her self-mastery, the capricious fortune that presides over literary aspirants vouchsafed her a smile or two. *Mari-golds* accepted another story, slightly longer, before the year was out, and paid a guinea for it; and Petronella bought a little account-book, and began to keep a record of her earnings. True, her first year's income was slender; but it was an earnest of good things to come—and what amusing reading it would be, when these good things had actually arrived! But in the meantime, having once tasted blood, she was no longer to be so easily appeased. A year ago—three months ago—she would have been uplifted to the seventh heaven by the sight of herself in print. Now—since Sarah had published a novel—nothing short of that would content Petronella. Contrary to her usual custom, she followed Sarah's example in another respect also, and said nothing about it. She had a plot conveniently in her mind—a plot

of long standing—which had always seemed too long to work out in a short story ; and she now fell to work on this with tremendous energy.

She had the more leisure to devote to it, since Milly's time and thoughts were almost exclusively concentrated on her approaching wedding. Hitherto the most unselfish of girls, she could now pay no attention to anything unconnected with the all-important subject. In fact, when the old Rector died, quite suddenly, Milly wept profusely—but confided with the utmost *naïveté* that her sorrow was not half so much for the loss of an old friend, as because some stranger would have to marry her. Petronella looked at her and wondered.

"It will be all right as soon as the wedding is over," Mrs King prophesied confidently. And Petronella, scarcely able to believe this, yet devoutly hoped that it might be true—for Milly engaged was so unsatisfactory, that Milly married might be a pleasant change.

Sarah refused point-blank to be bride's-maid. "It would only look as if you had me there for a foil to Nella," she said bluntly. "Think of *me* in white and gold !—Besides, honestly, Milly, I don't want the expense."

"Not for *my* wedding ?" said Milly, unreasonable and hurt.

"I'd rather spend all I can spare on a present for you, and not on a new frock for myself," was

Sarah's brusque retort. And even Petronella, with all her loyalty, felt the unreasonableness of Milly : since all their little world knew quite well the narrowness of the Garnetts' means. Sarah had scarcely left school, before she discovered that her father had spent more than half his small capital on her education. She promptly dismissed their servant, and did the work of the house herself—did it well, too, for nothing to which she turned her hand was ever done half-heartedly. The house was kept immaculate, though no room in it looked home-like : Sarah had too much of the masculine in her composition to be very successful with the purely feminine arts. Dr Garnett's modest meals were admirably cooked, and always forthcoming exactly when he wanted them ; and that alone was almost one woman's work, since in his ardent pursuit of science he turned night into day, and not infrequently demanded breakfast at nine o'clock in the evening, and dinner somewhere in the small hours of the next morning. The more one reflected on these facts, the more astounding became Sarah's feat in writing her book.

In due course, Milly resigned herself to being married by the new Rector. She even took a little kindly to the idea, in the hope that he himself might prove suitable to marry Petronella ; since, like every woman in love (and also like *Æsop's* famous fox), her one idea was to bring all

her friends into her own condition. There was not a great choice of young men in the little town, and they were all, consequently, inclined to set a considerable value on themselves ; and Petronella, in her turn, rated herself high, and was disposed to look down on them all from a lofty standpoint of scorn. Milly felt that one of her great missions in life would be to look out, with a matronly eye, for the fairy prince who alone would be worthy to be the husband of a genius.

In the meantime, the wedding-day drew rapidly near, and presents began to rain on Clematis Cottage : bringing with them the most curious and unexpected revelations of character.

"I can't think why Emily Benthall has given me *nothing*," said Milly, rather mournfully. "We went right through the school together, and I always thought she was such a friend of mine. And they know Wilfred quite well, too. He says that they used to be always asking him in, before we were engaged."

Sarah's odd eyes gave a flicker. Petronella smiled a little—very kindly and indulgently, but with amusement.

"It's not that I want *anyone* to give me a present, if they don't want to," said Milly hastily, oblivious of grammar ; she had seen the smile and misunderstood it. "I don't want Emily to waste money on me—but I'd have liked the very tiniest thing, just as a remembrance."

"Like Miss Cartwright's butter-dish—only it takes a really rich person to give a really mean present!" said Sarah.

They all laughed; but Milly's laughter stopped first.

"We should never have *known* that it was broken when she bought it, if we hadn't happened to be in the shop when it happened, and seen it put away among the things that were cheap, because they were imperfect. We should have thought that it was broken in packing, or in coming from her house to ours."

"As she meant you to," said Sarah acutely.

Milly did not like looking at the unpleasant side of things or people. She said: "Things *are* queer. Now Emily, who's always been such a friend, gives me nothing; and Alice Meadows, whom I hardly know, gives me that lovely salad-bowl, which must have cost *pounds*!"

"Yes, that *is* queer," Petronella agreed.

Sarah was silent. She knew that no one else would guess, as she did with her uncanny insight, that the motive prompting both the big gift and the no-gift was precisely the same.

Everyone knows that it is unlucky for a bride to try on her wedding-gown when it is completely finished; but no such prohibition attaches to her maids. Petronella put on her white and gold gown the day before the wedding, and came down in it to be admired. It was very becoming to her,

and it trailed softly on the ground, and added to her slender height.

"*Now* you see what a fright I should have looked in that sort of thing, as a pair to Nella!" said Sarah, ranging herself alongside, short and thickset in her ugly, useful dark serge. The contrast was indeed so extremely obvious, that kind Milly blushed with distress, feeling as if she had been thoughtless and cruel ever to have suggested such a thing. Sarah looked at her with her queer grin, which was not without its attraction for those who cared for her.

"Don't mind, Milly," she said. "I've never had any illusions about my appearance, you know. —Who's that coming in?"

Petronella turned, in all her finery, to fly; but she was half a minute too late. The hall-door and the drawing-room door opened simultaneously, and she found herself face to face in the hall with the incoming visitor—an unremarkable man in clerical attire. It was the new Rector, and Petronella had never met him; but self-possession rarely failed her, and gracefulness never. She trailed forward in her long white frock, and shook hands.

"How do you do, Mr Vecqueray?" she said: adding in haste, as she saw his ignorant masculine eye scanning her doubtfully: "No, I'm not the bride—only the bride's-maid! You will find the bride in the drawing-room, with my mother."

She laughed—and Petronella's laugh, which came rather seldom, was one of the most attractive things about her—and ran lightly upstairs, while the new Rector passed through the door which was being held open for him. Nor did she come down again until he was gone : to the deep regret of Milly, who had considered him with the dispassionate, pseudo-matronly eye of the bride-elect, and thought well of him.

"For goodness' sake, Milly, don't start match-making till you *are* married!" said Sarah, in answer to some remark that hinted at this point of view.

Mrs King had gone with the visitor to the gate, and was stopping there a moment to discuss some all-important last detail.

"I *wasn't*!" said Milly, blushing pinkly. "Only—only I think Nella really might like him; and she is difficult to please. Don't *you* think he is very nice, Sarah?"

"All men are nice in a place where there are so few of them," said Sarah; and there was an unusually sharp edge to her laugh.

Sarcasm was altogether beyond Milly's scope. She went on a little timidly—for here she felt herself altogether out of her depth—"And clever, too—don't you think, Sarah?"

"All parsons are clever, aren't they?" said Sarah, in a non-committal tone.

Milly blushed again, more distressfully than

ever, and hastened to agree : " Oh, yes, of *course* ! " For she belonged to that rapidly diminishing class which still considers a round collar to be a proof of all the virtues.

" You don't mean that you've actually found a man good enough to raise his eyes to Nella ? " said Sarah. She put her hand under Milly's round chin, and turned her face to the light. " Now I wonder *why* ? He's not tall. He's not handsome. He's very quiet. He doesn't play tennis. The only remarkable thing about him is that he's got blue eyes and black hair. "

" *Has* he ? " said Milly simply. " I didn't notice that. "

Sarah gave a little harsh laugh. " Then why *did* you think he might do for Nella ? " she asked.

Milly stammered and blushed a great deal. " Sarah—I never said anything of the sort ! " she protested. " Only—you always seem to know what one is thinking, and it's no use trying to hide things from you. I *do* want Nella to marry. I *do* look at all the men we meet, to see if they are likely to do. And—and I liked Mr Vecqueray. That's all. But I'm afraid you didn't. "

Sarah stared at her for a moment with her odd, light eyes ; then she turned away and looked out of the window. " Oh, Milly, I wish life were as simple to me as it is to you—I wish I saw as little as you do ! " she cried sharply.

This was beyond Milly altogether. She had

a dim, uncomfortable sense that Sarah's voice sounded like a cry of pain—and yet the next moment she had turned and laughed ; so that must have been a mistake.

"You never seem to have the least doubt as to any man's feeling about Nella !" she said.

"But how could anyone help falling in love with her ?" said simple Milly. "Think how lovely she looked just now !"

"Nella just misses being really beautiful ; and I never quite understand why," said Sarah, half to herself. "It's something wanting—I don't know what——"

She caught sight of Milly's indignant face, and broke off with a laugh.

"You're very pretty, Milly, and Nella's lovely ; and she's got what you haven't, and what is worth more, a million times over, than beauty—she's got *charm*."

"I don't think I quite know what you mean by that," said Milly : appeased on Petronella's account, and not in the least resentful on her own.

"Nor does anyone else," said Sarah.

The wedding went off without a hitch—a pretty, simple, unremarkable little function. Milly made a delightful bride, all smiles, tears, and blushes, taking her vows with a little shake in her clear voice, looking up in her bridegroom's face with the sweetest air of perfect confidence. He, it was evident, had no eyes for anyone else ; but

the opinion of the congregation was divided as to whether bride or bride's-maid carried off the palm. Petronella was unembarrassed and self-possessed, pleasantly aware of the many admiring eyes fixed upon her, quite sufficiently at leisure from herself to regard everything with critical and observant eyes. She did not in the least see why Mrs King should cry—Milly was going no farther away from them than next door ! She approved of the new Rector's voice, and his manner of conducting the service ; Milly would have fared less well at the hands of old Mr Collier. As for the service itself, she had hardly realised its full significance until she heard her own Milly saying : " I will." She looked with dispassionate eyes at her brother-in-law, trying to fancy herself—as she might have been—in Milly's place, devoutly thankful that she was not. She could not imagine wanting to promise all that for the nicest man in the world. At that point she caught the eye of the new Rector, read in it what might be a certain quiet penetration into her inmost thoughts, and blushed a little, composing herself to follow the service with more attention. After all, she was in church—a fact which many of the staring, whispering guests seemed to have forgotten altogether.

It was all over, and Milly had signed her maiden name for the last time, and was holding

her sister tightly round the neck, as the first notes of the Wedding March pealed out. "Oh, Nella, darling, I do hope you will soon be just as happy as I am!" she whispered, smiling through blissful tears.

Petronella smiled, very kindly and indulgently, as she kissed her. Milly was the last person in the world to understand—especially at such a moment—that there were people in the world who had higher interests in life than mere matrimony.

CHAPTER VIII

PETRONELLA OBSERVES MARRIED LIFE

PETRONELLA came back, flushed with laughing triumph, from throwing an old shoe successfully on to the roof of the departing carriage. The guests—there were not many, for it had been the quietest and simplest of weddings—all took their leave and departed, with renewed congratulations and good wishes; and Mrs King burst into tears.

“My dear Milly! I do hope he’ll be good to her,” she sobbed.

“Mother, you *know* he will,” said Petronella, a trifle exasperated. “Besides, they’ll be only next door!”

It all seemed most unnecessary and rather depressing. The excitement was over—the large culminating excitement of a long series of small thrills. Life seemed flat. The house was untidy and forlorn; and the thought of Milly’s empty room upstairs, where she would never sleep again, made Petronella choke a little, in spite of all her philosophy. She went to her

study and shut herself in, priding herself not a little upon the strength of mind which enabled her to put aside all sentiment, and immerse herself in her novel. Sarah, meanwhile, helped Mrs King and the little maid to put away all traces of the wedding festivities, and to pack up the array of presents, ready for transportation next door. When Petronella emerged from her retirement at the sound of the supper-bell, everything looked much as usual, and Mrs King had recovered her serenity. Sarah stayed to supper, talking much more than was her wont—another result of the day's excitement, Petronella supposed. She congratulated herself afresh upon her own self-control.

She had not in the least realised what it would mean to have Milly married and gone, until she came down to breakfast the next morning. It was the strangest thing that she should not be there; for she was one of those equable and punctual souls who are never late and never out of sorts. Petronella herself had occasional bad headaches; Milly scarcely knew the meaning of the word. Petronella was often silent and distraught at meals, meditating deeply over the story that she had in hand; Milly's smiles and pleasant chatter were unfailing. It seemed to Petronella rather hard that, with Milly gone, her mother should be very quiet and a little sad. It was quite a relief to retire again to the study,

and give herself up to writing ; and most fortunately she was at the moment at a critical point in her book, which demanded rather more than her usual allotted hours of daily work. With this safety-valve, she won through quite successfully to the happy day when the bridal pair returned from their honeymoon.

After all, having Milly next door was almost the same thing as having her in the house—Petronella had always felt and said that it would be so. Even the most devoted of young husbands, if he happens to be a doctor, must perforce spend many hours of the day away from his bride. Milly was constantly running in, morning, noon, and night ; Petronella found her helping about the house just in her old way, as if it were still her home. It was so much a matter of course that Petronella must not be disturbed at her writing or troubled with any household tasks, that it never occurred to her for a moment to offer to take over any of the many duties that formerly fell to Milly's share. After all, Milly was only next door, and her own household tasks, with everything so new, must be light enough. She had always loved house-work ; it was the most natural thing in the world that she should come and perform her old offices in her many spare hours.

So things went smoothly enough for a little while ; and then came a change. Milly, who had

always been running in and out with a happy face and helpful hands, stayed more and more in her own house. Milly, who had never had a day's illness since the measles of her childhood, began to look pale and dragged. She came in to lunch, and ate nothing. Petronella, going in to see her one morning because she had never appeared at all, found her lying on a sofa—an unprecedented sight—very white, with her busy hands lying limply in her lap. She began to hold mysterious conferences with her mother, from which the astounded Petronella found herself intentionally shut out. The practice of writing fiction is apt to colour the thoughts and opinions of its perpetrators. Petronella, revolving all these unaccountable things in her mind, came to an unpleasant conclusion, and finally broached it to her mother.

“Mother, have Milly and Wilfred *quarrelled*? She looks so miserable!”

To Petronella's astonishment, Mrs King laughed—a curious laugh, with pride in it, and yet a hint of tears.

“Oh, no—anything but that, Nella! I thought you knew long ago. Milly is going to have a baby.”

Petronella gave a gasp; then, recovering from the first shock, was surprised at herself for never having thought of such an explanation. But she was of a singular ignorance and innocence in such matters, and the idea had never once occurred to

her. Recovering a little, she was filled with a sudden rush of tenderness over Milly—her dear Milly who was going to brave unknown mysteries of pain and peril—and also she discovered herself to be much pleased. She would be an aunt! a position of no mean importance at twenty-one. She would also have every opportunity of learning things which would be extremely useful from the literary point of view.

But alas! her discoveries, when she made them, were of the most disappointing nature. There was nothing romantic in Milly's being miserably unwell, day after day and week after week. It was sad and disagreeable to watch her losing her pretty looks, to find her despondent, easily upset, ready on the smallest provocation to burst into tears. If Milly engaged had been like a changeling, Milly, the prospective mother, was like the ghost of her former smiling, pretty self. Mrs King counselled patience, prophesied wisely better things later on; but Petronella was too young to find much consolation in that.

"Milly, aren't you *sorry*? Is it *worth* it?" she burst out once, sitting by the sofa on which Milly lay limp, after a more than usually wretched day.

"*Worth it? Oh, Nella!*" said Milly, all in italics, opening wide, reproachful eyes on her sister. And Petronella, abashed, said no more. But privately, she was more than ever confirmed in her belief that the world of women was irredeemably

divided into two well-defined sections ; and she rejoiced that she had made that discovery, and ranged herself on the right side, in good time.

Life was a little lonely with the new, hardly recognisable Milly staying miserably indoors, or creeping out for little pottering walks that were obviously a penitential duty. Petronella went to the tennis-courts alone, came home alone, found Milly scarcely interested at all in the events of the afternoon—not half so much interested as she was in the stitching of ridiculous little garments, which seemed to Petronella without the smallest charm. It was incredible that only last summer she had been one of the keenest and best players in the Club. Petronella felt painfully that an unbridgable gap had opened between her and her sister, and was widening rapidly ; in some ways, Milly seemed to be more in sympathy with their mother, in spite of the generation that separated them. It required all the philosophy that Petronella could muster to reconcile her to this unpleasantly novel state of things ; and the effect was to turn her more and more to her beloved book, which at least never failed her. It was getting on fast ; she ought to have finished it by the end of the summer. Taking long, solitary walks over the Downs, she brooded over her plot, and wrestled with her characters : trying to reconcile herself to loneliness by the reflection that it was probably all for her good, from a literary point of view. Not seldom, out on these

long, lonely walks, she encountered the new Rector, striding along at a tremendous pace. It appeared that he was a very great walker indeed. Once he caught her up on her way home, and they went quite a long way together. Petronella was disposed to like him. She was critical of sermons, and his were good. She was critical of voices, and his was excellent. He was very quiet; but then of course, he was, from her point of view, not a very young man—certainly well over thirty. During nearly the whole of that walk together they discussed books in general, and Petronella's book in particular; which was perhaps a little surprising, since in this instance she was following Sarah's lead and working in silence.

"I know you write, Miss King; but I have never seen any of your work," was the way in which Mr Vecqueray introduced the subject.

"Oh, it's not likely that you should!" Petronella replied, with a quick laugh, and a humility that was more than half pride. "I've only had two tales accepted so far, both by a little paper that you probably never heard of—*Marigolds*."

"But you aren't going to be content with that?" he suggested quietly.

"Oh, *no*!" Petronella exclaimed with vehemence. "I've tried heaps of other papers and magazines, and I shall go on till I succeed. Besides—I'm writing a book."

She had blurted out the confession almost before

she knew it—she would have been puzzled to say why: perhaps to see if such an important announcement would make any impression on the extremely quiet manner that was just a little provoking. Petronella was used to homage from the men of her acquaintance. This particular man had scarcely ever looked at her; he did not appear to have noticed whether she was pretty or not.

It was perhaps worth while to have parted with her secret, for he was certainly interested. He even raised his eyes—those extraordinarily vivid blue eyes that were rarely seen at all—and gave her a quick, direct glance: almost as keen and observant as Sarah's.

"That must be extremely interesting," he said. "Do you—find it difficult?"

What odd questions people asked—the lay people, who had never tried to write themselves! Petronella told him, with a strong and agreeable feeling of superiority, that it was not difficult at all. She had recently, as a matter of fact, discovered for herself—what is always such an astounding surprise to novices—that anyone can write a passable novel, though only a heaven-born genius can write a successful short story. Something to this effect she divulged, as an Arctic explorer may talk of his discoveries to a stay-at-home; and Mr Vecqueray accepted her statement with the raised eyebrows of surprise, but with a very proper deference. He asked a leading question

or two—the questions which all authors have to put up with, and which grow so unutterably wearisome after the five-hundredth repetition ; but to Petronella they were brand new, and she answered gladly and with importance. No, she had not made out a species of ground-plan at the beginning, with all the names of the chapters and their contents written down in due order ; the general outline of the plot was, of course, in her head from the beginning, but it developed to a certain extent as she went on—sometimes in quite an unexpected fashion. No, she did not take her characters from real life ; she did not think that fair or kind. Yes, she did think over it a great deal, and worked out knotty points during her walks and at other peaceful times—notably after she had gone to bed at night. The plot—well, she could not say how she came to think of the plot : it seemed to have been in her mind as long as she could remember.

“I am afraid I have perhaps interrupted you now ?” Mr Vecqueray suggested, with his very quiet smile.

Petronella disclaimed this instantly and truthfully. As it happened, she had not been thinking of her book at all when she met him. She had been delighted to talk about it—it had really been a help ; she had, in fact, enjoyed it as a real luxury, after her unaccustomed months of silent work. Certainly, she liked Mr Vecqueray very

much indeed. There was no doubt about his being clever—how fully he had entered into her literary interests and difficulties! The only thing that struck her as rather a pity was the fact that he played no games. She liked a man to *be* a man. She said something vaguely to this effect at the tennis-courts next day, and received something of a shock in answer.

"Vecqueray? Why, he's a Rowing Blue, and a member of the Alpine Club!"

Petronella's limited experience did not help her to understand either of these distinctions very clearly; but her partner's tone left her in no doubt as to the value which he set upon them.

"I don't suppose he'd be seen dead on a tennis-court. He probably reckons it only fit for girls!"

"Oh!" said Petronella, a little stiffly. She did not like that. "I should have thought what was good enough for you was good enough for him!" she said, looking up at her tall partner, who was reckoned the best player in the Club.

"Oh, Vecqueray's a *man*. I'm only a weed!" said the pleasant young giant, with a pleasant, boyish laugh.

"What nonsense! Why, you're half a head taller than he is!" said Petronella, a little indignantly; for she liked Basil Cray, as a girl likes a man who has once asked her to marry him, retaining a faint sense of proprietorship even after refusal.

"What's the good of a few extra inches—except to make one look conspicuous?" he returned. "Why, Vecqueray could pick me up in one hand and carry me round the court!"

Petronella shook her head, unconvinced and a little stubborn. A tall man must necessarily be much stronger than one whose eyes were exactly on a level with her own. Besides, she was slightly biassed by a remembrance that the hero of her book, in whom she had tried to depict her ideal man, was considerably over six feet in height.

With her preconceived ideas slightly upset, she returned to her writing. The book was very nearly finished now. It would soon be ready to go and seek its fortune; and then she would feel herself once more on a level with Sarah—which would be decidedly pleasant, for she hated a sense of inferiority, especially in her own chosen profession. Sarah had written a novel, and now she too had written a novel; they stood once more on the same footing.

"Do you think you will ever write another book, Sarah?" she asked one day as they were returning from a walk.

"My new book is coming out next month," Sarah returned abruptly.

"Your new book! Why, I had no idea that you were writing anything at all!" Petronella cried, very much disconcerted.

"Why should one talk about it? It's not

particularly interesting, except to oneself—at any rate, before it comes out,” said Sarah.

“But—how fast you must write! When do you find the time?” said Petronella, trying to keep all trace of pique and annoyance out of her voice. After all, she would *not* be on the same footing as Sarah, even when her book was published! It was excessively trying.

“Oh, don’t *you* say that!” Sarah exclaimed forcibly. “It is bad enough to hear it over and over again, from everybody else. You can always make time, if you really want to. As a matter of fact, I needed the money rather badly.”

It seemed to Petronella—though she did not say so—an uncommonly low point of view.

“Besides,” Sarah went on, in her brusque fashion, “if you’ve got a story in your head, it’s *got* to come out.”

“You mean that one *must* write, because one loves it so?” said Petronella, kindling with enthusiasm.

“No, I don’t,” said Sarah. “I mean that you’ve got to write, because you can’t help it.”

CHAPTER IX

THE FIRST-BORN

ON the day that Sarah's second novel was published, Petronella's book returned to her, with a polite but frosty note, from Messrs Ellis & Dee, to whom she had submitted it with the highest hopes. It was an unfortunate coincidence. Not for worlds would she have confessed the contents of that small flat parcel, brought by the postman who had just delivered Sarah's presentation copies next door; but it needed an extraordinary amount of self-control to put aside her own disappointment, to smile and congratulate and be interested, to accept with suitable gratitude the green-covered volume which made her tingle all over with envy. For a very brief period she was disposed to thrust her own unfortunate manuscript into the heart of the kitchen fire, and then abjure pen and ink for evermore; but that fit soon passed. In a spasm of reaction, she packed it up again, and despatched it hastily to Messrs Caledon & Gourlay: their names being the first in a list to catch her eye. She would attack every publisher

in London, one by one, before she gave in—always with one exception. Nothing should induce her to send to the particular firm that published for Sarah ; it would be the last ignominy to be rejected by them.

She had been excited and desperate before, but now her feelings were akin to those of the gambler who stakes his whole fortune upon one last throw. For the first time in her experience, inspiration failed her utterly—a miserable and almost terrifying sensation. When she sat down at her desk, she could write nothing but what her own common-sense told her was rubbish ; she tore it up immediately, and destroyed it with haste and shame. Not a single plot would come into her mind : it seemed incredible that she would ever again find material for a novel, and she reflected in amazement upon the eighty thousand words that had flowed so easily from her pen. In short, Petronella had overworked herself, and consequently was written out, needing an interval of complete idleness to refurnish her exhausted imagination ; but the symptoms were new to her, and she found them very alarming indeed. In great depression, she walked lonely over the Downs, trying once more to picture herself reduced to the ordinary life of ordinary girls. She even, as a taste of that sort of thing, undertook to make one of the many little garments with which The End House was perpetually strewn ; but she

did it so very badly that Milly, after watching her vagrant needle for some time in anguish, was forced to suggest that she had better finish the work herself—and Petronella handed it over with considerable relief. She then undertook—Mrs King being laid up with a sick headache—to make a batch of cake ; and produced, after some hours of strenuous labour, a bullet-proof, concave edifice which the recipe madly declared to be sponge-cake, and several little dark lumps of lead, faintly resembling rock-buns. Her cookery had at least one good result—it made Milly laugh as she had not laughed for a long time.

For sheer envy, Petronella could hardly prevail upon herself to open Sarah's book. But she knew that she must read it, and that quickly, for fear that any sharp-eyed friend should divine the reason of her delay ; and, having once begun it, she read it through at a sitting, with ever-increasing surprise and admiration. It dealt with witches, and with Matthew Hopkins the Witch-finder, and still again with witches ; one might have supposed that Sarah had given up her whole life to the study of that one rather grim subject. She knew her period as intimately as her theme. Her plot was so cunningly devised that to the very last page Petronella read on in breathless suspense, uncertain of the *dénouement*. Her style was maturing very rapidly : a forcible, abrupt, unusual style, more remarkable for strength than for beauty,

very unusual for a young woman, admirably suited to her matter. For gruesomeness and interest, *Hopkins* bade fair to rival *The Hot Tap* in popularity. Petronella, closing the book, felt a painful and uneasy consciousness that, in comparison, her *Angela Trevor* was a pale, thin thing indeed : as an amateur water-colour looks washed-out beside a masterpiece in black-and-white. This uncomfortable impression, however, did not persist for any length of time. It takes all sorts to make a world in literature, as in life. A great many people prefer water-colours to the most virile black-and-white. Not a few of Sarah's readers had denounced her unmercifully for brutality and unpleasantness, and had placed her name on their private Index Expurgatorius. *Angela Trevor* would make its bid for favour to a very different public from the admirers of *The Hot Tap* ; it was calculated to please a very much wider circle. Petronella plucked up heart again, and set herself to wait as patiently as her keen anxiety would allow.

It was perhaps unfortunate that at the moment Mrs King was too busy to spare much attention for her younger daughter. Milly's state of health was, quite naturally, of paramount importance ; and, besides this, the care of two households is a burden for the shoulders of even the best of housekeepers. Milly was quite unfit to do her own share : Petronella was so outside the house-

keeping scheme of things, that her mother simply never thought of asking her for help. So she solved the difficulty by rising a little earlier, and going to bed a good deal later ; and managed to keep all things going smoothly, without any diminution of her own pleasant cheerfulness. But she was certainly tired ; and perhaps this dimmed a little the usual keenness of her bright eyes, and kept her from noticing that Petronella was perturbed and watchful. On the other hand, Petronella was a great deal too absorbed in the fate of her book to realise for a moment that her mother was doing more than usual, or to observe how tired her pretty, plump face grew before the end of the evening. If concentration on one subject be a sign of genius, there is no doubt that she was qualified to take a very high rank among the great ones of the intellectual world.

But—since to all things there is an end—by degrees Milly grew better, resuming her own reins of government by little and little ; and Mrs King—perhaps with a little unconscious sigh of relief—went back to her usual hours and her usual round of occupations. She would have had leisure then to notice Petronella ; but for the latter also her storm and stress was nearly at an end. On a certain fine morning in September, Mrs King, reading her letters at breakfast, was suddenly startled by a sort of gasp from the other end of the table.

"Nella! What is the matter?" she cried, rising quickly. "My dear, how white you are!"

But Petronella waved a shaking hand with a typewritten letter in it. "It's all right—I'm quite well," she stammered breathlessly. "But—I've written a book, mother, and it's accepted!"

She was fairly dazed with joy: too dazed to hear with any distinctness Mrs King's answering exclamations of pride and wonder and delight. The first words that came clearly to her were said rather timidly: "Is it a book like Sarah's, Nella?"

"Not nearly so clever, I'm afraid," Petronella returned modest answer; but her eyes were shining. She would not have liked anyone else to say so.

"Indeed, I'm sure it's a great deal better than anything Sarah ever wrote!" protested Mrs King, maternal and indignant. "I didn't mean that—I know *that*. Haven't you been writing and writing all your life, while she only took it up just casually, as one might say? No. What I meant was, that I hoped it's—*pleasanter* than hers."

"Why, mother, both Sarah's books are quite proper," cried Petronella, taking up the cudgels for her sister-authoress.

"Proper! I hope no one I know would ever write an *improper* book!" said Mrs King, scandalised. "But—they're so dreadful, Nella!"

I don't like to think about such horrible things, and still less to read about them. It keeps me awake at night—it does, really.”

“There is nothing in mine to keep you awake at night, mother,” said Petronella, laughing; and then she laughed again, a private laugh of much amusement, noting how very unflattering an interpretation might be put on her remark.

The good news had come in a good hour—just when Mrs King was happier about Milly, and could rejoice freely in the triumph of her younger daughter: just when Milly herself was well enough to enter into it all with nearly her old enthusiasm, and was perhaps all the better for the stimulation of mild excitement. It was very pleasant indeed to Petronella: the delight of mother and sister, the teasing, brotherly congratulations of Dr Emery, her own proud sense of hard-won attainment. There was one slight drawback, and that was the absence of Sarah, who had gone with her father to a meeting of the British Association; but even that, Petronella felt, was not entirely to be deplored. It was not only because she wanted to have the pleasure of telling her news in person, that she did not write it immediately to Sarah. She wanted to have everything signed and sealed, and a definite arrangement to show in black and white; she felt wonderfully prudent in thus obliging herself to see the possibility of a slip betwixt cup and lip even now.

Messrs Caledon & Gourlay, in their very pleasant and flattering letter, had accepted the book only provisionally—"if Miss King were disposed to accept their terms." If Miss King were disposed ! She could have laughed aloud at the ridiculous "if." She would have accepted any terms in the world to get her first novel published ; and the offer made struck her as being decidedly generous—especially since, as Messrs Caledon & Gourlay were careful to point out, there is always considerable risk about the financial success of a first novel. They dwelt upon that point at some length, making Petronella feel that a beginner was a very humble person indeed ; and then, as if fearing that they had depressed her unduly, they wound up with a few more pleasant words of praise, and a discreet hint of the probability of success. Petronella sat down and dashed off an answer there and then : pluming herself once more upon the cool and business-like tone of her letter. It would, of course, have been most imprudent to show the eager gratitude which in reality possessed her. Messrs Caledon & Gourlay should see from the first that they had no silly slipshod girl to deal with, but a level-headed young woman, with her practical eyes wide open. And presumably the desired effect was produced : since by return post in an equally business-like manner, came a long, imposing document, setting forth the AGREEMENT made this 15th day of September between

Miss Petronella King, hereinafter called the Author of the one part, and Caledon & Gourlay, hereinafter called the Publishers of the other part. Petronella, scarlet with excitement, feasted her eyes on the stiff, semi-legal phrasing of the succeeding thirteen clauses. She found some of them very puzzling : and was especially overawed by the stipulation that the publishers only undertook the expenses of the author's proof-corrections to the extent of six pounds. Six pounds' worth of corrections ! Petronella had revised every sentence, almost every word of her manuscript, with the most loving and scrupulous care ; in her innocence, she had never imagined the existence of those curious people who prefer to rewrite practically their whole book on the margins of the proof-sheets. Moreover, in her eyes six pounds was a very great deal of money. What a great and wealthy man must a publisher be, to think so lightly of wasting that large sum ; and it was this mighty being who had graciously prophesied for her a fair measure of success. Before Petronella's dazzled eyes there danced a vision of cheques that ran into two, and even possibly into three figures. She signed the momentous document—very badly, to her vast annoyance, for her hand was shaking with excitement,—returned it, and received promptly a duplicate, signed by the great Mr Caledon in person on behalf of his firm. The deed was done.

The next day, Sarah came home ; and Petronella could hardly wait to let her open her own front door, before running in to divulge her secret.

"Sarah—I've something to tell you !"

"Well : I know what it is, of course," Sarah replied quickly. "I didn't expect it just yet, though.—You're engaged."

"*Engaged !*" Petronella's voice actually broke on the word, in her astonishment and vexation. That Sarah, of all people, could make such an egregious mistake ! "*Engaged !*" she repeated with scorn. "You know perfectly well that I never mean to marry !"

"Yes. Those are just the people who get engaged first," Sarah returned. There was something so vaguely unfamiliar in her tone and her sharp glance, that Petronella was a little bewildered.

"It's nothing of the sort. I've had a book accepted," she said.

"Is *that* all ?" cried Sarah, with a still sharper glance.

Petronella stared, more puzzled than ever, and half-affronted. Was this "side" ? But Sarah had never been known to be sidey. Was it jealousy ? But that was absurd ; Sarah's success had been too undoubted to allow of her being jealous of a mere beginner—besides, she was always the soul of generosity. The great

announcement had certainly fallen lamentably flat, whatever might be the reason. A moment later, however, the unfamiliar tone and look were gone, and Sarah gave one of her queer, pleasant grins.

"Congratulations, Nella! I'm delighted. Who's your publisher?"

Petronella told her.

"Caledon & Gourlay! Why did you go to *them*?"

Petronella was very much affronted. "Why not?" she said stiffly.

"Well—you'd better have tried my people."

"I prefer an old-established firm," was Petronella's lofty answer. She could not resist revenging herself by that little feminine pin-prick: for Sarah's publishers, though they were rising rapidly on a tide of successes, were undeniably new.

"Have you signed your agreement?"

"Of course." Petronella's head rose a little higher.

"Oh, well—that's settled, then," said Sarah. It was one of her curious unfeminine traits that she never worried over might-have-beens, when once a matter had been definitely arranged. "Don't be cross, Nella. What's the matter? You know I'm glad you have had the book accepted—awfully glad."

Now Petronella had intended to ask, not for advice—she was fully capable of managing her

own affairs—but for information on one or two points that were rather dark to her; but Sarah's reception of her news had been so unflattering that she was now very strongly disposed to drop the subject loftily and altogether. However, there was no one else to consult, and it was extremely inconvenient to remain in the dark; so she smoothed her ruffled feelings, and smiled forgivingly.

"I did want you to tell me one or two things, Sarah."

"Fire away! You know I'll tell you anything I can." Sarah prepared to listen with attention.

"Well—I seem to have to wait such a long time before I get any money."

"*How* long?" Sarah jerked out abruptly.

"They make up their accounts half-yearly—in June and December. But they don't pay me anything for five months after that."

"That's all right—I mean, it's all wrong, of course, but it's the custom. I suppose," Sarah added indignantly, "that no other profession in the world would be content to sit down and wait patiently for more than a year after the work is finished!"

Petronella was very much relieved. She knew, of course, that one had to guard against being overreached by a grasping publisher. She had scanned her agreement with sharp eyes, on the

look-out for possible traps; it was undoubtedly gratifying to find that this curious clause, which had made her slightly uneasy, was nothing unusual.

"Do they pay you anything on publication?" Sarah asked abruptly.

"On publication? Oh, no! *Ought* they to?" asked Petronella, with renewed alarm.

"There's no ought about it; some do and some don't. Mine do. It makes no difference in the long-run, of course. Only, if you are hard up, it's pleasant to have some of the money at once.—When will your book be published?"

"They didn't say."

"Didn't you *ask*?"

"No. Ought I to have asked?"

"Well, it's always interesting to know that sort of thing," said Sarah drily.

"But of course they'll publish it as soon as they can!" cried Petronella, highly offended. "You seem to think that they've taken it in a sort of grudging way. They *didn't*. They said all sorts of nice things about it—they said it would probably be a *great success*!"

"Did they? My publishers never said pretty things like that about mine," returned Sarah with a grin.

"They *must* think well of it," Petronella cried eagerly, "for they've asked for the next nine books that I write!"

She had left this impressive piece of news to the last, expecting to make something of a sensation; and in this she was not disappointed. Sarah turned on her, with eyes that were absolutely incredulous.

"Your next *nine books*! Did you agree to that?"

"Why, yes, of course—I was delighted!" cried Petronella, freshly indignant. "They wouldn't have *wanted* any more of my books, unless they thought really well of this one!"

"How long do you suppose it will take you to write nine books?" Sarah inquired.

Petronella paused over that. It was a point of view which had not occurred to her. She had taken rather more than a year over *Agatha Trevor*, from start to finish; but she would probably learn to write more quickly, with greater experience: say nine years for nine books. That would make her—— She stared at Sarah a little blankly.

"Yes, thirty always does seem pretty old, doesn't it?" said Sarah, reading her thought in her own uncanny fashion.

"Well, it isn't everyone who has ten novels published before they're thirty!" cried Petronella, rallying.

"No," said Sarah, very drily indeed. "And—after that—I suppose you will be free of Messrs Caledon & Gourlay?"

"I shan't want to be free!" Petronella protested indignantly. "They have offered me very good terms—why should I want to make a change?" She knew that Sarah was aching to see her agreement: but nothing should induce her to show it, after what had passed.

"You've not sold the copyright, of course?"

Petronella stared at her.

"I mean you're not taking a lump sum down for the book—you're going to be paid in royalties?" Sarah said impatiently.

"Of course," said Petronella, with stiff dignity—though, truth to tell, she had been in perfect ignorance of the whole matter until she read her own agreement. "They are going to pay me twenty per cent."

"Twenty per cent. ! on the published price !"
It was now Sarah's turn to stare. "Do you realise that that means a shilling on each copy sold?"

"Of course," said Petronella again, airily. She was thankful that she had worked out that sum for herself, with considerable labour, before she underwent this cross-questioning. "It isn't a very great deal for a six-shilling book, is it?"

"A six-shilling book? Don't talk nonsense, Nella! You know perfectly well that the ordinary shop-price is four-and-six; and the trade get it for about three-and-two.—Are you sure you're getting twenty per cent.?"

"*Quite* sure," said Petronella, with indignant emphasis. She was tired of this examination; she would carry the war into the enemy's country. "What's the matter, Sarah? Don't you get so much?"

"Now, I do; but I began with ten per cent., and was glad to get that clear. Publishers are very apt to hanky-panky with a first novel, you know. They know that beginners are thankful to rush into print on any sort of terms."

Petronella coloured guiltily, and was enraged with herself for so doing: especially as Sarah evidently saw the betraying colour.

"You're not paying anything yourself, of course, Nella—for advertising, or anything like that?" she said sharply.

"*Of course* not!" cried Petronella, much offended: though in truth she had never before heard of such a possibility, and she would most certainly have agreed without demur to the arrangement, if it had been made a condition of publication. "I pay them *nothing*—nothing at all. And when they *do* pay me, it's at the rate of twenty per cent. at once."

"Well! I congratulate you!" said Sarah brusquely. "They must think uncommonly well of your book." And, since this was Petronella's own private opinion, the rather stormy conference ended on an amiable note.

There came in due course to Petronella the joy

of her first proof-sheets : to the normal eye, singularly uninteresting slips of printed matter, but to her cabalistic writings full of magic and mystery, her passport into the great kingdom of Letters. They came in sections, each with a duplicate and a portion of her own original manuscript, hacked and torn and scribbled in the margins, and signed at regular intervals by unknown beings whom she vaguely imagined to be proof-readers. What hours of loving toil—with what subsequent headaches—she spent over them, pausing whole minutes over the deletion of a comma, pacing up and down her little study in the search for some elusive word which might improve on a feeble original ! Truth to tell, she was somewhat put to it at first for the proper method of proof-correcting. She would not stoop again to appeal to Sarah ; but happily a dictionary provided her with a specimen page, and after long poring over this, she went ahead valiantly, with delightful, intimate thrills, every time she wrote *stet* or *run on*. Seen in this new dress, *Agatha Trevor* seemed almost a stranger ; and at times *Petronella* thought her novel very good, and at other times she blushed for its shortcomings. She never mentioned the matter to Sarah, who for her part preserved a tactful silence ; but Mrs King and Milly were each privileged to inspect a specimen sheet, and were both suitably impressed and awed.

"But it won't look like that in the end, will it, Nella?" said Milly, a little timidly. "It won't be in long thin columns like this?"

Petronella laughed reassuringly, with a pleasant sense of superiority. How incredibly ignorant the ordinary person was of matters literary! She comforted Milly with assertions that in due course it would appear in the customary shape and form of a usual library book; and a week or two later she was enabled to confirm her words of wisdom by a sample of the second set of proofs, in book-form. Though she would not for worlds have confided as much to anyone, these book-form proofs struck her with dismay; they looked so thin, so poor, the margins so narrow. She surreptitiously compared them with a library book of Caledon & Gourlay's that happened to be in the house; and was comforted to find that the pages corresponded in size—an addition to the long list of proofs that the average human eye is hopelessly inaccurate. By the time that she had gone through this second set of proofs with scrupulous accuracy, she was most heartily weary of *Agatha Trevor* and her fortunes. It was a real relief—though it left the world a little empty of interest—to return the last pages and know that her share in the work was done. She had only to wait now, with such patience as she could muster, for the glorious day of publication.

She was a good deal aided in this difficult task

by the fact that Christmas was now near at hand. Even in the quiet life at Clematis Cottage, there was a good deal to be done and thought of : more than usual this year, since Milly could not take her usual energetic share in the preparations.

"Shall you be able to manage the screen by yourself this year, Nella?" she asked : so wistfully that Petronella, who had no great love for church-decorating, agreed at once to do her own share and her sister's as well. They had always undertaken between them to decorate the high stone chancel-screen, but the lion's share of the work had invariably been Milly's, while Petronella did as much as she pleased : which was, in truth, very often exceedingly little. This year, however, she planned out an unusually elaborate scheme of decoration—to please Milly, when she should come to church on Christmas morning—and sallied forth on Christmas Eve, bent on doing her best.

There are in this world the born church-decorators who love it, and those who decorate from a sense of duty. To neither of these classes had Petronella hitherto belonged ; she came and helped Milly, and when she was tired or bored she went away. But this year, with everything depending upon her alone, there could be no shirking : even though inexperience had betrayed her into an absurdly difficult arrangement of her holly and ivy. There was no help to be had, since every worker had her own allotted portion, and time

was short. Even Sarah, frequently a self-appointed hewer of wood and drawer of water, was not to be had ; she had been kept at home all day by a more than usually complicated experiment of Dr Garnett's, which demanded all the time and attention of them both—she had expressed a grim hope that it might be finished in time to let her go to one at least of the Christmas services. So Petronella crouched over the lower part of the screen, and reached high over her head to the top, and soiled her hands with ivy, and pricked them with holly ; and her design grew with a slowness that filled her with dismay.

"I wonder if Mr Vecqueray will think of asking us in to tea, as the old Rector always did ?" said the girl who was doing the pulpit, coming to rest herself by looking at Petronella's work. "That's pretty, Nella ! but how tremendously difficult !"

"I didn't think it would have taken so long," sighed Petronella, stretching her weary arms.

"It will look sweet, though. It's prettier than anything Milly ever did," said the other girl.

That was the sort of praise that pleased Petronella. She liked to be first in anything that she undertook—even an uncongenial task like this. She returned thanks in kind by graciously admiring the pulpit.

"Here's Mr Vecqueray ! Now *is* it tea or only compliments ?" cried the other girl expectantly, under her breath.

It proved to be both. The new Rector, in his quiet way, bestowed exactly the meed of praise and appreciation that is very gratifying to a weary worker; and immediately afterwards the whole little company trooped gladly across the churchyard to the Rectory.

It was the first time that Petronella had been there since the death of the old Rector; and she looked round her with interested eyes. The house was large, and the drawing-room might have been charming. In the old man's time it had remained to the end exactly as it had been newly furnished for his bride in the early 'sixties—solid, expensive, hideous. He had been left a childless widower in early middle life, and had never since allowed anything to be removed or altered: so that his parishioners were well acquainted with the heavy, lumpish furniture, and could hardly imagine the room in any different guise. But now it was changed indeed, and in many eyes not for the better. After the old familiar arrangement, it looked surprisingly bare; and no one present had wit enough to admire the beautiful old gate-legged table on which tea was laid, or to recognise the stiff chairs for genuine Chippendale. The walls were distempered white—an almost unheard-of innovation in the early 'nineties,—and lined with dark oak bookcases. A cheerful fire was burning, but the room was chilly, and bore the unmistakable hall-mark of

a room that is seldom used, and then only by a bachelor.

"I am not much in here," said Mr Vecqueray to Petronella : so exactly as she reached this point in her meditations, that she started and blushed. He smiled with a little amusement.

"What a splendid lot of books !" she said hastily, to cover her embarrassment.

"They take up a great deal of room, I'm afraid," said Mr Vecqueray, pouring out tea.

Petronella's eyes, following his deliberate movements, suddenly dilated. "Oh," she cried, "you have hurt your hand ! What *have* you done to it ?"

He glanced at a very ugly half-healed scar, just below his wrist, and then sharply pulled down his cuff to hide it, with an air of annoyance. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all—a mere scratch.—Do you take sugar, Miss King ?"

"But it *wasn't* nothing !" said Petronella, going very late in the evening to report her doings to Milly. "It looked exactly like a *bite* !"

Dr Emery, who was in the room, turned very sharply. "Haven't you seen Vecqueray's big bull-dog ?" he said. "But go on, Nella ! Milly's wild to hear exactly all that you've done ; and I can't let her sit up more than ten minutes longer."

So Petronella retailed minutely how she had decorated the screen, and told of the bare Rectory drawing-room and the magnificent tea ; and Milly,

absorbing all details with the gusto of the house-bound semi-invalid, was most reluctant to obey orders and go to bed. She went, however, as in duty bound, at the end of the ten minutes; and Dr Emery opened the front door for Petronella.

"Do *you* know what Mr Vecqueray has done to his hand?" she asked, standing on the doorstep. "It really did look like the marks of teeth."

"It was teeth—but not the bull-dog's," said Dr Emery with a very grim face. "Two women were fighting down Jancey's Passage; and Vecqueray separated them. I was called in to someone at the far end of the Passage, and arrived just too late to be of any use in the scrimmage. They were both mad drunk, of course, and one of them is a big powerful brute of a creature, over six feet high—I've had to do with her before, when she nearly murdered her husband. No one but Vecqueray would have been mad enough to interfere single-handed. I wonder he came out of it alive, for of course they both turned on him at once."

"Mr Vecqueray doesn't *look* so very strong," said Petronella, calling up a mental picture of the quiet man pouring out tea in the Rectory drawing-room.

Dr Emery laughed, and the pleasant boyish look came back to his face. "An Irishwoman in the crowd summed it up rather neatly at the time.

She said: 'That's the biggest man of his soize that I've iver seen!'"

Petronella laughed a little too; but she was very thoughtful, and rather pale. "Where *is* Jancey's Passage?" she asked.

"Just at the back of nice, quiet, respectable Hobson Street, where you and Milly do most of your shopping. There's a sweet little rookery behind there, though no one would suspect it who hadn't been to see. I don't recommend you to go hunting for local colour in that part, by the way, Nella!"

Petronella laughed, shaking her head. "I don't think it sounds exactly suited to my books," she said.

"For a pleasant, quiet country-town, this one boasts of slums that beat anything I've ever seen—Liverpool not excepted," said Dr Emery. "By the way, don't say anything to Milly about this, of course."

"Of course not," said Petronella.

Christmas came and went, and the New Year started its career in a hard frost, which lasted for the best part of six weeks. Petronella skated with vigour, pitying from her heart homekeeping Milly who sat placidly stitching and embroidering. And on the first mild day of February the world was the richer for two newcomers, who made a simultaneous appearance—Milly's son and Petronella's first book.

CHAPTER X

WILD HYACINTHS

THE baby was christened Alaric St Aubyn : to the horror of Petronella, who preferred plain names for boys. But Milly thought it a beautiful name, and so did Mrs King ; and Dr Emery was so filled with relief and joy to be at the end of all his anxiety, that he would have agreed to any suggestion with enthusiasm. As, however, in later life the baby was invariably called Mungo, it was of very little consequence, either way, in the long-run.

In all Petronella's experience, no night had ever been so long or so dreadful as the one which preceded the arrival of her nephew. Milly was very ill. Petronella had never imagined it possible for her brother-in-law's cheery face to wear such an expression as it did when he looked in, about midnight, to report no change. She saw nothing at all of her mother. She could not go to bed, but sat, shivering and frightened and alone, nursing the drawing-room fire, listening nervously to eerie whisperings outside, with soft sighings

and sharp cracking noises, that heralded the break of the long frost. She wondered, trembling, exactly what was happening next door. Aided by a lively imagination and a very complete ignorance, she drew for herself fancy pictures of the most appalling nature. Surely, by this time, Milly must bitterly regret having chosen the painful path of wifehood and motherhood! She had already lost—or so it seemed to Petronella—the best part of a year out of her life. Now that that was at an end, she would of course return in some measure to her old ways—Petronella was young and inexperienced, and a baby seemed to her a very negligible quantity—but nothing could give back those wasted months of misery and invalidism. And then, after Wilfred had come in again to give his report with that hardly recognisable face, Petronella's thoughts took another and more alarming turn. Suppose Milly died! Wilfred, who was a doctor and ought to know, was evidently a prey to the gravest anxiety; and unhappy Petronella, trying to fancy a world without Milly, burst out crying, and then tried in a frenzied fashion to pray. Milly could not die—God could not be so cruel! Yet such things did happen. In books—from which Petronella's experience of life was mainly drawn—such things happened very often. Little as they had in common, the sisters were dearly fond of one another, and they had never been separated in

their lives, except for the brief space of Milly's honeymoon. Even in these last months, when perforce they had done scarcely anything together, half the interest of Petronella's doings was the reporting of them to Milly; both girls were looking eagerly forward to the time when some, at least, of their old habits might be resumed. Petronella sat, with tear-stained face, watching the slow, slow movements of the hands of the clock. She was too frightened and miserable to make up the fire any more; perhaps, half unconsciously, she felt that it was the correct dramatic attitude to let it die down unnoticed. To the penetrating chill of the thaw, there was now added the deadly chill of dawn; and she had never in her life before sat up into the small hours. A horrible grey, faint light began to steal round the edges of the blinds, fighting with the gaslight and slowly getting the better of it; and suddenly she heard steps outside once more, and started up, white and trembling. It was Wilfred again, peaked and haggard, but with quite a new expression.

"Nella, it's all right; and he's a boy!"

"Milly?" gasped Petronella. She cared nothing at all about the baby.

"Milly's doing as well as possible now. She sent you her dear love."

The message was an untold relief to Petronella. Out of all the mystery and terror of the night, her own Milly had returned to her, sufficiently

herself to speak words that were meant for her alone.

"May I see her?" she stammered, with stiff lips.

"Not just yet—as soon as she wakes. I left her settling off to sleep. Go to bed yourself now, Nella—you look like a ghost!"

"But it's morning!" said Petronella with a quavering little laugh, staring at the grey light.

"Never mind! Go to bed and get a long rest."

So Petronella went to bed, and fell into the soundest sleep of her life, quite worn out with unaccustomed watching and anxiety.

It was late in the morning before she awoke, which was a little bewildering. Not half so much so, though, as the subsequent discovery of her early-rising mother just sitting down to breakfast, with the clock disgracefully near mid-day. Mrs King looked very tired, but brimful of happiness and importance—a new importance.

"Just think, dear!" she said. "I'm a grandmother before I'm forty!"

The sense of unreality grew upon Petronella. It seemed as if Milly had, after all, done something rather wonderful—creating a grandmother, an aunt, a father, and a mother, who overnight had not existed. She laughed a little hysterically: but could only explain, in ineffective reply to her mother's glance of inquiry: "You don't look

like a grandmother—and I don't feel like an aunt !”

“But we *are*—both of us !” cried Mrs King, beaming.

Petronella ate her breakfast and asked questions ; but the answers struck her as feeble and unsatisfactory. She was not considered qualified to hear any details of what had passed in the night ; she was neither wife nor mother. She left off asking questions, with some slight feeling of indignation. Mrs King did not realise that she was no longer a child—but no matter ! Milly, her own sister and contemporary, would, of course, tell her anything that she liked to ask.

“I suppose I can go and see her now ?” she said, as they rose from the table. She had suggested an earlier visit—the moment she came downstairs—but had been discouraged.

“Oh, yes—nurse will be ready by this time. Mind and don't call the baby *it*, Nella !”

Petronella laughed and promised.

“By the way, there's a parcel for you—I forgot it,” said Mrs King, looking vaguely round.

A parcel ! Petronella's heart was in her mouth instantly. She held out trembling, eager hands ; her eyes devoured the publishers' label on the outside. Milly was entirely forgotten.

“Won't you wait till you've seen Milly ?” cried Mrs King, scandalised.

“I can't wait,” said Petronella, in a shaking

voice. She was slashing at the string—to the distress of Mrs King, who invariably untied knots. “It’s—it’s my book!”

“Your book? What book?” said Mrs King vaguely. But Petronella—for her comfort—was far too excited to hear.

The books were disclosed—six precious volumes, “With the Publishers’ Compliments.” Petronella took up one after another with reverential fingers: the realisation of her life-long dream. By this time Mrs King—though not in the least appreciating the importance of the great event—had come to some understanding of it.

“Why, Nella, you haven’t written *six* books, have you?” she said, a little bewildered.

Petronella laughed shakily. “Only one—at present, mother! These are all the same book: six copies, which the publishers have sent me to do as I like with.”

“Well, but it’s your own book! Surely you can have as many as you please?” cried Mrs King.

“Not without paying for them, I’m afraid,” said Petronella, laughing again with intense happiness.

“Pay for your own book! I never heard of such a thing!” exclaimed Mrs King indignantly.

Petronella did not attempt to explain. She only said: “And the first of all is for *you*, of course, mother dear.”

Mrs King took the volume rather gingerly, and kissed her : turning it over and over as if she did not know what to make of it, looking at the name on the back, and the title-page, with wondering eyes of incredulity.

"To think of this being *your* book, Nella!" she said. "Fancy your having written all that!—And now you'll come and see Milly and the baby."

Petronella's excitement was dashed as if with cold water. Mrs King was putting the precious volume away in a drawer—carefully, but without the smallest reluctance : rather eagerly, in fact. It had never occurred to her to read so much as a page. She was not a great reader at any time ; it would have seemed to her almost immoral to sit down with a book before the evening hours of leisure. The stupendous nature of the event was entirely lost on her. There was a great lump in Petronella's throat, as she caught up a cloak and followed her mother in silence. Of course she wanted, badly, to see Milly and the baby ; but—no matter ; Milly, at any rate, would understand, would be thrilled, overjoyed, triumphant. Petronella had one of the precious volumes well hidden under her cloak, but she had some faint qualms as to the advisability of presenting it at once—she knew quite well that over-excitement was to be avoided.

In her bright, warm, firelit room, Milly lay in bed, eager and expectant. A rush of tenderness

came over Petronella as she stooped to kiss her ; and then followed quickly a sudden curious chill. This was not her own Milly who had come back to her through the Valley of the Shadow ; it was a new, a sweeter Milly, but strangely unfamiliar. The cheeks that used to be pink and plump were now thin and pale, and pain had refined all her features into a new delicacy ; but it was something in Milly's shining eyes that struck Petronella most—that made her feel as if some odd, invisible, permanent wall had grown up between them.

"Look ! Isn't he *beautiful* ?" said Milly. She looked down, with a fond pride that beggars description, into the curve of her arm ; and Petronella's eyes, following, encountered a puckered red face of extraordinary shape. She was so little prepared for the nature of the vision—having never in her life seen a very young baby—that she gave an involuntary exclamation ; but fortunately it was so incoherent that Milly accepted it, without question, as a natural cry of admiration.

"Yes, isn't he *lovely* !" she said. "And so strong ! Let him hold your finger, Nella."

Petronella cautiously advanced her hand towards the tiny ones that were feebly clenching and unclenching themselves ; and was astonished at the grip which seized her. "He *is* strong !" she said : feeling profoundly thankful to find any sort of truthful compliment.

The baby suddenly opened a cavernous mouth, and emitted piercing shrieks.

"He doesn't like me," said Petronella hastily, withdrawing her finger.

"My precious ! you *do* love your auntie, don't you ?" murmured Milly absurdly. But here the nurse interfered with authority, decreeing that Mrs Emery must not be overtired, and that the baby must be fed and put to sleep ; and Petronella withdrew—not reluctantly. Milly did not want her. She smiled good-bye, but she did not even raise her eyes from the baby. And Petronella had feared that her great news would over-excite her. Why, she would not have cared—would hardly have taken it in if her sister had published a whole library-full of novels ! Petronella took the green book back under her arm, as she had brought it, and threw it down, and burst into a passion of tears. Her own Milly was gone—quite gone. The present Milly was blind to everything in the world but that little wriggling, shrieking red creature.

"He is hideous—hideous—*hideous* !" Petronella cried out vindictively, alone in her own room ; and she rubbed with a petulant vehemence at the finger that the baby had held. She had an odd feeling that the soft, queer little hand was gripping her still.

Of what a baseless fabric was built her dream

of Milly, well and strong again, once more her inseparable companion, as in the old days ! Milly recovered, indeed, with an astonishing rapidity. She regained her plumpness and pinkness and pretty dimples ; she was able to work as hard as ever—but she was a slave. This was hard to bear ; but infinitely harder was the discovery that, far from resenting this state of things, she positively hugged her chains. To Petronella it seemed irksome in the extreme that the baby could not be left for more than a short couple of hours ; but Milly departed with reluctance, and was all impatience to return. She spoke of broken nights—Alaric St Aubyn was a bad sleeper—as if it reflected much credit on him to be so lively. When—weeks after publication—she at last began to read Petronella's book, she read it in snatches, with her baby on her knee. When his little fighting hands knocked over a bottle of dill-water and deluged the beautiful green cover, she was very apologetic ; but she evidently thought it rather pretty of him, and an amazing instance of strength for a two-months' infant. Petronella, inwardly very wroth, accepted the situation with dignity ; but it was the last straw. She made up her mind, bitterly but philosophically, to a future in which Milly had practically no share. The old happy days of companionship were over for ever. Their paths in life had diverged too far.

She had, for her comfort, a whole host of new

interests and distractions at this period. The very day after publication, there had come to her urgent letters from press-cutting agencies, impressing upon her, with a noble disinterestedness, how important it was for her to learn what the critics said of her book. Both enclosed a sample of their wares : a real veritable review from a Scotch paper, which Petronella unfolded with shaking fingers. It was calm, critical, judicial, holding just sufficient encouragement to make her eager for more. Her plot was unreservedly approved : except the end of it, which was scathingly denounced for its weakness. Her character-drawing was contemned ; her style was praised. Reading on in a fever of alternate heats and chills, she learnt finally that her book was very immature, but that it held good promise for the future. . . . She despatched her half-guinea forthwith to one of the agencies, and bought a newspaper-cutting book ; and thenceforward the day was a blank which did not bring her one or more reviews.

She very rapidly acquired much knowledge of a surprising description. She learnt that she possessed an unusually deep insight into human nature : but that at the same time she was shallow and frivolous. She learnt that her English was concise and epigrammatic : but that the book was filled with trite sayings, such as a schoolgirl might have taken for worldly wisdom. She learnt that

she was simultaneously a very young girl, a mature and rather embittered woman, and a man who had disguised himself flimsily under the transparent veil of a feminine *nom de guerre*. She gained a bowing acquaintance with one type of reviewer after another ; quailing under sarcasm, writhing impotently before misunderstanding, flushing and tingling at words of praise. The day that brought her a little paragraph, likening her to the great Henry Wray, was a day of rejoicing beyond words. The day that saw her compared with the blameless Miss Silsoe, was one of bitter humiliation. At the outset, she was minded to stick in her cutting-book only such reviews as were complimentary ; but she fought and vanquished this craven desire, and left out not even the most scathing comment, which made her cheeks burn as she read it. Perhaps the hardest of all to bear was the subtle irony of a great daily paper, which gave scrupulous details as to name and publisher, the size of the book in inches, and the number of its pages : and added blandly that this would not preclude a lengthier subsequent review—which, needless to say, never came. Petronella took that badly : even more so than the iniquities of those reviewers who filled their space and saved themselves trouble—and incidentally destroyed with much completeness the interest of any possible reader—by outlining the plot as fully and baldly as might be, and salved their reviewing

consciences by adding half a line of comment at the very end.

It was not only, however, into the ways of reviewers that Petronella obtained a staggering insight. She learnt very rapidly, to her vast surprise, that the literary profession is regarded with curiously different eyes from any other. People who would never have dreamt of inquiring into the professional income of their doctor or lawyer, seemed to think that it only showed a flattering interest to ask her point-blank how much she was to be paid for her novel, and when and where and how, and were openly affronted when Petronella, with flaming cheeks, declined to give any details. Guesses were openly bandied about in her presence, ranging from those of the loyal schoolgirl adherents, who firmly believed that every penny of every six shillings (published price) went into her pocket, to those of the sceptics who told her unblushingly that of course she was paying for publication. There were even those who went so far as to question Milly in secret, and did not believe her protestations of ignorance: and at that Petronella was glad that she had kept her own counsel, even from her nearest and dearest—even though Milly was openly, and Mrs King secretly, a little hurt at her reticence. Petronella felt, with a lump in her throat, that those who had cared so little had no *right* to information. No! they might go on

worshipping the baby, and she would hug her secret to herself.

On the whole, she found herself enjoying a mild portion of celebrity. The output of fiction twenty years ago was a mere thin trickle, compared with the torrential floods of to-day; the very small novelist and the beginner were less in danger of being entirely swamped. Petronella's native town was gently excited by her development into a real live novelist. True, Sarah's success had surprised everyone very much, and had been a nine-days' wonder; but very few people had more than the slightest acquaintance with her, and with even these she was not popular. Furthermore, her books were either extremely admired or extremely disliked; and the latter class of readers largely outnumbered the former in that unenterprising provincial town. The majority of readers there preferred their fiction very weak and decidedly over-sugared; they did not like to be frightened, or puzzled, or made to think. They complimented Petronella lavishly on her "pretty tale"—while she writhed in secret at that obnoxious adjective, her feelings only comparable with those of the damsel who, earnestly desiring to be considered beautiful, hears herself universally described by the blighting phrase "a sweet girl." When kind old ladies added, with the best intentions, that *Angela Trevor* was fit to be put into the hands of the youngest school-girl,

Petronella found it hard to look suitably grateful for that high praise. Even Mrs King and Milly phrased their admiration after that fashion ; and that was only another proof of the gulf that was widening between the sisters.

Sarah, of course, did not offend in that manner ; but her criticism was too acute—too nearly akin to those more astute reviewers who had made Petronella turn hot and cold.

“I think your plot is excellent, Nella—all except the end.”

Petronella, who was tired of hearing that, grew restive. “What is the matter with the end ?” she asked, rather crossly.

“It’s inconsistent. A man like Captain Vincent—you’ve drawn him extremely well, Nella, especially considering how few men you know——”

Petronella liked that still less. She interrupted, with crimson cheeks, “I should have thought I knew a good many men—*quite* as many as you do !”

“Oh, you know numbers of *boys* well enough—don’t think I’m grudging you your conquests !” said Sarah, with her abrupt laugh. “And don’t drag me into the question at all ; I don’t count, from that point of view. I ought to have been a man myself. It would have suited me far better.—I don’t know, though. For I should infallibly have fallen in love with you, and quite as infallibly you wouldn’t have had me ; so

perhaps I shouldn't have been any better off, after all."

It was one of Sarah's queer speeches to which there was no answer ; and apparently she expected none, for she went on, without a pause. "What I mean is, that Captain Vincent would never have proposed to Angela again, when she had once refused him."

"Why not ?" said Petronella.

"Why not ? Because he *couldn't*—being the sort of man he was," said Sarah, staring at her with frowning brows. "Don't you *see* that ? Don't you *feel* it ?—Then how in the world did you ever come to write the book ?"

"It just *came*—I don't know how I thought of it !" said Petronella, much offended and very haughty. But Sarah still stared at her, with the expression of a mathematician hopelessly baffled by his problem.

Only for a short time did the stream of reviews flow in at all copiously. They rapidly dwindled, until Petronella learnt to be grateful for one or two in the week ; and finally they stopped altogether. She longed to ask Sarah if this were the usual thing, and if she had already received a reasonable number ; but pride forbade. The excitement was all over, and life became a very tame and flat business. Petronella was working hard at her new book, but it was not at present a labour of love. The plot bothered her ; it

did not come spontaneously, like the plot of *Angela Trevor*. She was well enough pleased with her heroine ; but her hero was indubitably, even in her partial eyes, a stick of the woodenest description. She found herself secretly rather glad on the rare occasions when her hours of work were apologetically interrupted ; and secretly rather sorry that she had always made such a point of their being sacred from disturbance. She would have liked some of the old long, swift walks over the Downs with Milly ; but Milly, chained to a perambulator, bound to return at a set time, and discoursing unweariedly of the charms and afflictions of Alaric St Aubyn, was by no means the sort of companion she craved. Therefore, when Sarah one day announced that wild hyacinths were out, and that it was a shame not to go and gather them at once, Petronella agreed joyfully, and proposed the next morning for the expedition.

"Better wait till the afternoon. There's so little of the morning left, by the time you are ready," said Sarah.

Petronella reddened.

"I'll take a day off—I've been working very hard," she said ; and then was vexed with herself for the spontaneous, self-betraying breach of her rule, vexed with the story that would not come easily, most of all vexed with Sarah, whose sharp eyes never missed anything. But

drawing back now would not mend matters ; and, failing Milly the inaccessible, she would rather have Sarah's company than that of anyone else. The next day dawned bright and clear ; an ideal warm spring day, such as may be found frequently in fiction, and very rarely in real life. Certainly it was pleasant to be out in the early freshness of it, instead of bending over a desk. So they walked along in great good-fellowship ; and to the uninitiated eye they would have seemed just a pair of happy-looking girls, one ugly and the other handsome—in nowise resembling that dread personality, the Lady Novelist.

The particular wood for which they were bound was the best part of a mile away, and quite inaccessible to perambulators. Milly had looked a little wistfully after them as they started, and had waved Alaric St Aubyn's mottled fist after them from the window ; and that easily-displeased individual had resented the liberty, so that his rageful shrieks followed them down the road. Petronella gave a little shudder of distaste. "Poor Milly !" she said.

"She doesn't think herself pitiable," said Sarah.

"No—but I don't see things from her point of view."

The obvious retort would have been "Perhaps some day you will" ; but Sarah never said

the obvious thing. She gave Petronella one of her sharp glances ; and then turned abruptly away, diving into a hedge.

"What are you looking for?" asked Petronella, when she had waited impatiently for a minute.

"I only wanted to see if that nest was an old one or a new one." Sarah scrambled back, scratched and muddy.

"I didn't even *see* there was a nest—and what *does* it matter?" said Petronella, staring into the hedge with disdainful eyes.

"Everything matters, and you never know when you'll want to know about it," said Sarah. "I had no idea how wretchedly ignorant I was about everything, till I began to write—especially about the little things that one doesn't naturally notice."

Petronella had also made that illuminating and disagreeable discovery ; but she would not have owned to it for worlds. She gave a little impatient shrug, and said : "Oh, do let us leave writing alone for this morning, and talk about something else !"

"Sorry !" said Sarah ; and forthwith began to talk of anything and everything that was not literary. And, as Petronella had been almost instantaneously ashamed of her pettishness and anxious to make amends, the greatest harmony reigned.

The wood for which they were bound lay on a steep slope by the side of the high road ; and even before they turned into it a shimmer of blue was visible through the still scanty leaves of the trees, making Petronella cry out with delight. "Be quick, Sarah !" she exclaimed ; for Sarah had suddenly lagged behind, and was kneeling in the dusty grass by the roadside. "I'm sure there is nothing to see there !"

"It's not that—my bootlace is undone. Wait a minute !" said Sarah. But her voice had suddenly a curious sound, and she did not follow on, even after there had been time to fasten half a dozen laces.

"Come !" Petronella cried impatiently, turning back from the entrance of the wood-path.

"Look here, Nella, I'm awfully sorry—I've got to go back."

"Aren't you *well*?" said Petronella, incredulously ; for Sarah's tough and wiry strength had never yet been proved fallible.

"Quite, thanks ; but I must go back at once. There's something I'd—forgotten."

Petronella accepted the situation with a somewhat injured acquiescence. Presumably Dr Garnett had chosen this morning for some experiment that he could not be trusted to carry out alone ; the limitations of time and space ceased to exist for him, when he was once embarked upon anything really interesting to him. Sarah's return

might quite reasonably be necessary to avert some explosion of more than usual magnitude, and it was a natural thing that she should offer no further explanation. She was habitually very reticent about her father's work, and indeed much of it was quite impossible to expound to the ignorant laity. So Petronella, nodding farewell, went on into the wood with her basket ; and Sarah turned sharply back along the road by which they had come. She walked very fast ; and almost immediately she met, face to face, someone who had presumably been following in the footsteps of herself and Petronella.

"She's gone into the wood," said Sarah, not pausing, and speaking with extraordinary abruptness ; and blue eyes and grey met with a flash like that of steel upon steel.

"Thank you," said Vecqueray, passing on. His tone was as quiet as usual ; his glance had said, without surprise, "*So you know ?*"

But Sarah, hurrying home, was scarlet—she who never changed colour,—and her eyes were the terrified, angry, defiant eyes of a wild creature at bay ; or of a witch who encounters all unexpectedly a magician more powerful than herself. "*You don't know—you would never dare to guess !*" they cried in a dumb passion. She clasped and wrung her hands ; fierce, unaccustomed tears splashed down upon the road as she hurried along. And so, turning a corner, she almost ran into peaceful

Milly, wheeling out Alaric St Aubyn for his morning airing.

"Why, Sarah! Is anything the matter? Where's Nella?"

"I had to come back—something I'd forgotten. No, there's nothing at all the matter," said Sarah: so normally that Milly, pursuing the even tenor of her way, smiled at herself for an absurd fancy that she had been crying—Sarah, who was never known to cry for anything.

Petronella in the wood, bending over a carpet of celestial blue, heard footsteps and looked up: half expecting to see her late companion returned. She was surprised at the advent of Mr Vecqueray—it was a most unlikely meeting-place,—but quite pleased. She had seen a good deal of him during the long skating season of the past winter. She liked him very much. Latterly, any form of entertainment which did not include him had seemed a little flat and dull.

"How odd to see you here!" she said, standing up and smiling at him as they shook hands.

"Not at all. Miss Garnett told me that you were here," he replied point-blank.

Petronella opened her eyes a little at that. It was not at all like Sarah to bestow gratuitous information upon any acquaintance whom she happened to meet.

"Besides, it's not the first time that we have met here—is it?" he said, with a little half-smile.

"Isn't it?" said Petronella, wrinkling her brows in an effort to remember, and failing.

"You have forgotten our first meeting, then?" He was watching her with an odd intentness.

"Not at all," said Petronella promptly. "It was the day before Milly's wedding. You came to call—and I had been showing off my bride's-maid's dress, and was just running upstairs to take it off."

"That was the second time, not the first," he replied. "We met years before that—here. Your sister and Miss Garnett were here too; but I only had a glimpse of either of them. You were quite a child, of course; but you were a writer even then. You were kind enough to read me what you had written."

He looked at her, half smiling, half inquiring. Petronella laughed.

"I must have been a dreadful little nuisance," she said, "if you have remembered my worrying you all these years!"

"While you have forgotten?" he suggested quietly.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid so—absolutely. But please don't think that is so unflattering as it sounds. I had rather a bad illness when I was a child, and it quite wiped out several things that went just before it. Meeting with you must have been one of them."

"I see. That is a little reassuring."

His tone, like his expression, held a suggestion of faint amusement that was half embarrassed. Petronella looked at him inquiringly with her large eyes, and he answered the look as if she had spoken.

"I am a poor hand at any sort of speaking, Miss King ; and you see that you have rather cut the ground from under my feet. When I followed you here——"

Petronella's eyes opened wider still.

"When I followed you here," he repeated deliberately, "I had an agreeable idea that I was being supplied with a ready-made opening. I had only to remind you of our first meeting here, and go on from that—and I am brought up short at the very outset by finding that you have entirely forgotten it !"

"I—am sorry," said Petronella, a little bewildered.

The shade of amusement had altogether vanished from his voice when he spoke again, after a moment's pause.

"After all, what I want to say is perhaps better without any attempt at a preface.—Miss King, I love you. Will you be my wife ?"

Petronella had a sheaf of wild hyacinths under her arm, and they all fell to the ground with the great start she gave.

"Oh—oh, I never thought of such a thing," she exclaimed, very lamely.

"I am sorry for that. But—you will think of it now?"

His tone was perfectly cool. Sarah would have had the wit to look at his hands, if she had been in doubt as to what he felt; but Petronella, looking at his face and seeing it rather set and quite composed, was a little piqued. She had had some experience of proposals; but they had all been from suitors of about her own age, who were one and all wordy, incoherent, vehemently and flatteringly agitated. She had certainly never thought of Mr Vecqueray in this light. In her eyes, he was a great deal older than herself; and the title of Rector made him seem older still—partly from its association with the very old man, his predecessor, who had held it for so many years.

"Don't you care for me at all—Petronella?"

There was something in his voice which gave her an odd, new, half-painful sensation. She cried out hastily, because the feeling hurt: "Oh, I do—I like you very much indeed!"

"I'm afraid that is not much good to me—unless you mean a good deal more," said Vecqueray, with a queer grave smile; his tone also was grave and rather stern, and had a touch of authority in it—and Petronella had been accustomed to rule all her life. She was annoyed and yet half-fascinated, attracted and at the same time repelled. No other lover had ever dared to take such a tone with her. The whole situation

had, in fact, a novelty that was more than half distasteful ; and the most distasteful part of it was the fact, suddenly discovered to herself, that for the first time in such a case she was not quite sure of her own mind. She had always been quite certain that she did not want to marry any of her other suitors : she was not quite certain that she did not want to marry Vecqueray. About one thing, however, there was not the smallest doubt ; and she seized on that with relief.

"I don't want to marry anyone at all, for a long time !" she said.

She had made that statement so often ; it had always sounded so satisfactorily final. Why, then, in this instance, did it ring in her ears with almost a childish petulance, that made her colour suddenly and feel foolish ?

"That was not what I asked you," he replied quietly—not in the least crushed by her ultimatum, as other people had invariably been. "I love you very dearly, Petronella. Do you love me at all ?"

Petronella gasped. The question was so crude that it fairly took her breath away ; other people had always enveloped it in decent wrappings.

"I—I don't know," she said, very lamely indeed.

"Will you try to find out ?" he returned, with a quiet patience.

Petronella thought hard. She did like him immensely ; till she came to think about it, she had not quite realised how much. Not only a very

great deal better than any other man she had ever known, but in a different way that she had never troubled to investigate. She was even a little frightened, now that she came to consider the matter, to realise what a cold shock it gave her to think of his possibly going away—as Ernest Carey had gone away, after she refused him. Did that mean that she was in love? She glanced, with a doubtful shyness, at this new lover, who was conducting his unexpected wooing upon such unexpected lines. She certainly did not think him handsome—surely she would have done so if she had been in love with him? Her busy brain ran on, applying other tests as they occurred to her. She was always glad—very glad—to be in his company. The idea of living at the Rectory was undoubtedly attractive; she liked the house, she would like the society of its master. But in the train of that thought came others that were by no means agreeable. She did not at all like parish work; she had always avoided being drawn into the many nets that were spread to catch her services. Milly loved all that sort of thing, and it was abundantly discussed at Clematis Cottage. Petronella remembered, with a shudder, how many times she had heard it lamented that there was no lady at the Rectory; she could guess well enough all that would be expected of that imaginary unfortunate—who would scarcely have an hour in the day to call her own.

"Does it take so long to decide?" said Vecqueray, in an odd voice that was not quite steady.

"Oh, I *can't* answer just plain Yes or No!" Petronella cried, throwing out her hands in desperation. "You seem to think that there is only one thing to be considered——"

"That is exactly what I do think," he interposed swiftly.

"It isn't so!" she cried, with vehemence. "I suppose it makes very little difference to a man whether he is married or not—he goes on with his work just the same,—but it makes *all* the difference to a girl; and more to me than most girls, because I have my own Work to think of. You wouldn't like to have to give up yours, just because you were married; you wouldn't do it——"

"I have not asked you to do so, have I?" he interrupted.

"No—but that is what it would mean, of course. You don't understand; but it would be impossible for me to write unless I could have regular hours and keep to them, as I do now. I don't like housekeeping—I don't like parish-work," panted Petronella. "I should do it all very slowly—and very badly—and it would take me all day long, and I should be longing all the time to get back to my Work!"

"Then am I to understand that you never

mean to marry at all—or only that you do not mean to marry *me*?” He asked the question very slowly, forming each word with extreme care, as if he found them rather difficult to pronounce.

“I—I don’t know,” said Petronella, a little staggered. Her outburst had, in truth, taken her much farther than she had meant to go. She had so far forgotten her usual attitude, as to seem to contemplate the possibility of marrying him—even of marrying him at no such distant date. Ever since Milly’s engagement she had protested vehemently that she never intended to marry at all. His straight and urgent questions, and a certain traitorous something in her own heart, had reduced her to a protest that at least she meant to wait for many years. Now—she did not know what she wanted. If he had been ready—like all her former suitors—to promise anything in the world to please her: if he had undertaken to arrange that she should never be troubled with the distasteful details of parish-work and house-keeping, it is probable that she would have given way then and there, with a weakness worthy of any ordinary unliterary girl. But he made no offer of the sort. On the contrary, he stood looking at her with eyes that were sad and reproachful; and he spoke, after a minute, in a voice that matched his eyes.

“You have answered my question, then—you are in love with your writing, and not with me.”

Something was hurting Petronella unbearably—she had a vague sense that something was slipping from her grasp, something that she did not want to lose. She began to speak incoherently, hardly knowing what she said, only anxious to justify herself and avoid that painful loss.

“Don’t—please—you don’t understand! That has nothing to do with it——”

“On the contrary, it has everything to do with it, in my opinion,” he replied, very slowly and quietly. “You can only offer your husband the second place in your life; and I—should not be satisfied with that.”

“You don’t understand—nobody who doesn’t write can understand!—how much it has always meant to me, all my life,” stammered Petronella, very pale.

“And you—what do *you* understand of how much this means to me?” he returned, with a sudden stern quickness.

It frightened Petronella. It made her feel young, foolish, forlorn. A quick rush of feeling, threatening to overwhelm her, made her suddenly realise that she was perhaps throwing away what she would never be able to win back.

It was Milly’s firm belief and constant assertion that her son was one of the most remarkable people in the world; and at that critical moment he justified her maternal boasting by throwing his influence into the wavering balance of his aunt’s

fate. For there came suddenly from the road above the wood a shrill, unpleasant wail, that spoke of hunger and crossness and excellent lungs ; and Milly's gentle cooing voice in reply. It was by this time a very familiar sound ; and it recalled instantly all the reasons that had induced Petronella to take such resolute vows against matrimony. Swift visions swept over her of Milly's cramped, domestic life—so perfectly satisfactory to her, so entirely uncongenial to anyone of literary aspirations. With a start of horror, Petronella realised how very nearly she herself had fallen into that dreaded trap of domesticity. *She* to turn household drudge ! to have her days—yes, and very probably her nights too—filled to overflowing with the petty duties that she found so distasteful ! to snatch only a moment here and there for the literary interests that represented life and happiness to her ! She must have been mad, to give a moment's thought to such a proposition. She drew a long breath that was almost a gasp ; and Vecqueray, watching her, said at once with extreme quietness :

“So I see there is no help for it. Good-bye, Miss King.”

He went straight on through the wood ; and Petronella was very sorry and very much relieved. She sat down among the wild hyacinths, and cried a little ; for it was necessary to wait—Milly had obviously come along the road to meet

her, and she did not at all want company on her homeward way. Nor, however, was it advisable to invite surprised comments on her empty basket ; so she set to work, very half-heartedly, to fill it, gathering up first the armful of flowers that she had picked—how long ago ? It seemed hours and hours ; at any rate, they were all drooping already. Petronella watered them with tears, as she laid them forlornly in her basket. She felt an unaccountable sense of loss and misery. The thought of her novel—which must claim an extra share of time in the evening, since she had deserted it this morning—was singularly unattractive.

CHAPTER XI

SARAH COMES TO JUDGMENT

THE way home seemed long, and dull, and dusty. Petronella hoped anxiously that she was not late for lunch ; and then, glancing at her watch, was astounded and relieved to find how early it was. Mrs King would be out doing her round of household shopping. Milly would be feeding Alaric St Aubyn, and beguiling him into the subsequent slumber that he detested. Sarah, of course, would be concealed from all human eyes in the laboratory with her father. There was every reason to suppose that Petronella would have ample time to recover her composure and self-possession before she need face anyone.

She opened the door of her little study—where no one ever ventured to disturb her without permission,—and there, to her immense surprise and discomfiture, Sarah sat by the window, which looked out into the long, narrow garden. The whole circumstance was so unheard of as to be inconceivable—that Sarah should intrude unbidden upon those sacred precincts : that she should be

sitting idle, with her hands before her : that—most astonishing of all—she should be alone in a room that had books in it, and should not be reading.

She rose up. Petronella had shut the door behind her, before she saw that anyone was in the room. She paused in surprise, her basket on her arm ; and Sarah stood facing her with her back to the light.

"I wanted to be the first to see you, when you came in—to be the first to congratulate you," she said, in her abrupt and harsh voice.

"To congratulate me !" Petronella repeated, colouring consciously.

"Oh, don't be missish !" cried Sarah, more harshly than ever. "What's the use of pretence, between you and me ? Of course I know. I've known for a long time—a very long time before I saw him following us this morning. I'm only surprised that he has waited so long."

Petronella sat down at her writing-table, so that her face was half turned away, and began to pull the hyacinths out of her basket. "I'm very tired," she said. "And—you're quite mistaken, Sarah. There is nothing to congratulate me about."

"Nothing—?" said Sarah, staring ; and then swift and sudden : "You don't mean—you can't mean that you've refused him ?" she said.

"I can—and I do," said Petronella, not looking at her, but speaking with much dignity.

"Good Lord!" said Sarah—an extraordinary ejaculation from a girl's lips: but not half so extraordinary as the tone in which she said it, or the look which she turned on Petronella, who looked up at her startled.

"*Really*, Sarah!" she said.

As if words failed her, Sarah answered only with a stamp of her foot.

"I don't know why you are behaving in such an incomprehensible way," said Petronella, holding up her long neck. "You know perfectly well that I never mean to marry!"

"I know perfectly well that you've *said* so. Most girls do!"

"It's not a mere question of saying," said Petronella, flushing angrily; she did not like being classed with "most girls." "This is not the first time that I've refused a man who asked me to marry him, and you never made any fuss before!"

"Oh, you may be a fool—you *must* be!" Sarah returned swift answer, with scornful eyes; "but you can't be such a fool as to compare any of those proposals with this. This was a *man*. None of those boys of yours were fit to black his boots—and you know it!"

"That's begging the question," said Petronella, flushed and quivering. "It's not a question of him—it's a question of myself. It makes no difference whether it's one man or another. I don't mean to marry *at all*."

"It's not a question of him, it's a question of yourself," Sarah repeated slowly after her. "That's what you've acted on all your life—isn't it, Nella? For the sake of that miserable potty little talent of yours, you've been willing to sacrifice everyone who has ever had to do with you!"

"That's not true!" Petronella leaped to her feet with angry eyes. "I've never asked anything from other people—I've sacrificed myself, if you like, but I had a right to do that, and I was glad to do it! When other girls were just playing and enjoying themselves, I've sat writing and writing, till sometimes I've been too giddy to walk when I've stopped——"

"While your mother and Milly did your work as well as their own," Sarah put in swiftly.

"I don't know what you mean," said Petronella, staring at her. "They had their kind of work, and I had mine. I'm sure I worked quite as hard as they did.—I should never have expected *you* to turn on me like this, Sarah! You, at anyrate, might have been trusted to understand. My Work is more to me than anything in the world. I'm willing to give up other things for the sake of it—I'm not unreasonable enough to expect that I can have everything. I read something lately by a woman writer, that seemed to me horribly true: '*When the laurel is planted in a woman's breast, ah! how it hurts!*'"

"No one who could really feel that could say it!" Sarah retorted like a flash. "Sorry, Nella. You know I hate sentiment; it's not in my line at all."

Petronella preserved a dignified, aloof, and offended silence. Her voice had shaken over the flamboyant quotation; but she might have known that Sarah would not find it so affecting as she did.

"Besides—*the laurel*"—the words leaped from Sarah's lips as if she were hardly conscious of speaking—"Geniuses are few and far between, Nella."

Her meaning was sufficiently obvious; and Petronella reddened with mortification and anger.

"I know I have done nothing much—as yet," she said. "But everyone has to begin somewhere. I don't profess to be a George Eliot.—You don't understand, Sarah. *You* only took up writing quite lately; but it's been part of my life, ever since I was a child."

Sarah said nothing. She did not remind Petronella, even by a look, that, though her own experience had been brief, her achievements had already been considerable.

"I couldn't give it up! I don't think it would even be *right*!" Petronella exclaimed; and her voice was a little strained and high.

"Did he ask you to?" Sarah inquired, very drily.

Petronella faltered and flushed. "N—no," she

said. "But it would come to that—it *must*. How could I possibly keep to regular hours for my Work, if I were married? Look at Milly!"

"Yes, look at Milly!" Sarah returned, with a sudden fierce energy. "She's having what you and I would call a rotten time, now. But think of her pride in three years' time, when she can take Mungo trotting out with her! Think of her in ten years' time, when she'll have a nurseryful of jolly little things hanging round her skirts and calling her Mother! Think of her in twenty years' time—not caring a bit about getting middle-aged, because she'll be twice as much interested in her girls' coming out as she ever was in her own!"

"Yes, that's all very well—for Milly," Petronella protested. "But I hate babies—and I don't much care for children."

"If that were honestly true—oh! don't think I don't believe you! but you're more ignorant about yourself than anyone I ever met," said Sarah—"you'd never say it. The people who really dislike children are the ones who pretend they adore them."

"That's nonsense," said Petronella. "And it's beside the point, too. I suppose nothing will ever make you understand my point of view, Sarah. But at least you've got to believe that I know my own mind. I don't mean to marry—now, or ever."

SARAH COMES TO JUDGMENT 201

She held herself at her full height, proud and confident; and Sarah looked at her with intent and scrutinising eyes.

"It's all very well to say that now—and to think it, as I've no doubt you do. But you'll be sorry at thirty, Nella: you'll be sorrier still at forty: and at fifty, when it's too late, you'd give your eyes to be able to stand where you are now and choose differently!"

"What business have *you* to talk to me like this?" Petronella cried, in a flame of indignation. "You're no older than I am! What do you know about it? And, if you hold such strong views about all this, why don't you marry yourself?"

"Marry? *I* marry?" said Sarah, with a sudden cold slowness. "Who would want to marry *me*?"

She turned unflinchingly to the light, holding up her ugly face so that the morning sunshine fell full on it. Petronella, looking at her, and flushing red, did not know what to say.

"Don't think I'm asking for pity," Sarah said, jerking her head away again after that brief moment of illumination. "As you say, one can't expect to have everything; I'm not complaining. If I could have my choice and be a second Milly, I shouldn't be of much use to my father—so things are best as they are!"

"If you could be *Milly*!" Petronella cried,

astonished. "But, Sarah! Of course Milly's a perfect darling—but she isn't the least bit clever. You can't mean you would like to change with her! Why, you write *books*. You've had a second edition of one, and a third of the other—you're almost famous already!"

"Yes, I know. Milly isn't clever; in some ways she's very nearly stupid," said Sarah slowly. "But she's sweet and sound all through; and—after your mother—she's the best home-maker I've ever met. She will have plenty of troubles and worries that won't come near you and me—but she'll bring up her sons to be clean men and good citizens, and her daughters to be sweet and sound and good home-makers like herself. She will be surrounded, all her life, with so much love that she'll hardly feel the pricks of sorrow and the chills of old age—and she'll take it all with her, through death and beyond; while you and I—shall have perhaps a taste of what you call Fame. But that's a poor thing to warm yourself by, when you are old and cold, and all alone. And we shall have to leave every rag of it behind us, when we die."

Petronella gave a little shiver. She was astonished and half-frightened; she had never in her life heard Sarah say so much at any one time. Vaguely wishful to defend herself from an accusation that she hardly understood, she brought to light her old scrap of philosophy.

SARAH COMES TO JUDGMENT 203

"I suppose a good deal of that is true, Sarah. But, as you say, we are not given a choice of what we will be like. Some people are meant to marry, and some are not!"

"Milly—and myself! The examples of that rule are quite ready to your hand," said Sarah, with a little harsh laugh. "But *you* stand between us, Nella. You are one of the fortunate few who can choose—for Heaven's sake, don't choose wrong!"

Petronella flushed deeply.

"Don't be angry with me," said Sarah, her voice dropping suddenly to the softest note it knew. "I've said a good many hard things to you to-day—but it's only because I care for you so much!" Her strong square hand closed on Petronella's with a grip like a man's.

"I know—I know." Petronella was very nearly moved to tears by the change in the harsh voice; but she struggled against that absurd weakness. "Of course, you can say what you like to me, Sarah! Don't I know that you've always loved me the best of all?"

The grip of Sarah's hand suddenly slackened, and it dropped to her side. But Petronella, intent on what she was saying, hardly noticed.

"If I had a choice—I don't know that I had, really. No one has ever really seemed to understand what my Work is to me!—it's made now. I can't go back. I don't want to, even if I could!"

CHAPTER XII

SIR THEODORE DISMISSES HIS VALET

FULL summer came and passed ; and Petronella saw no reason to regret the choice she had made. She would have been very sorry indeed—she owned that to herself with much frankness—if it had involved her never seeing Mr Vecqueray again ; but it did not have that effect. She saw quite as much of him as she had during the previous summer ; which was not any very extraordinary amount, since, with the beginning of the tennis-season, she practically gave up her walks on the Downs, and he, as has been previously stated, was no tennis-player. Their meetings, therefore, were now infrequent and accidental : but when they did occur, it did not seem to her that he was in the least altered, either in manner or appearance. She was heartily glad of that—she told herself so with great emphasis again and again, that there might be no mistake about it. She had undoubtedly chosen aright. She had not lost her friend in retaining her freedom. Her

novel was now running smoothly and without any effort, its initial difficulties quite vanished. The more she observed of Milly's life, the more absolutely certain she became that she herself was not intended for matrimony—and she studied this question very closely indeed. It might almost have been imagined that she was looking out for flaws, and was gratified when she discovered them.

There were, without question, a few thorns in Milly's bed of roses. Her Wilfred's unfailing optimism made him a delightful and cheering companion, but it also rendered him quite blind to the fact that their means were limited. The practice was increasing—had he not made in the last year twenty pounds more than in the year before? Naturally, there would soon be a revival of the palmy days when old Dr Denyer had been young Dr Denyer, and there had been no other doctor of account in the town. In vain Milly pointed out that there were now two other Richmonds in the field: Wilfred pointed out gaily to her in return that the population had also increased. In vain she preached prudence, and talked of a rainy day. Wilfred did not believe in anticipating misfortune, or in the likelihood of any sort of rainy day; he was young and strong, and so was she, and Mungo, if not precisely robust at the present moment, would be perfectly certain to develop without the smallest difficulty into a hearty little chap by the time he could

walk. And almost immediately after that Wilfred was summoned unexpectedly to the funeral of his only sister: departed with his cheerfulness temporarily in abeyance: and returned, bringing with him an orphaned baby-niece whom he had adopted out of hand. Milly, for all her motherliness, was a trifle aghast.

"Well, I couldn't leave the poor little soul to strangers!" Dr Emery protested.

"I thought you said that her father's people wanted to take her?"

"Well, they *are* strangers. I never met any of them, before the other day."

"Not strangers to the child herself, though—she knows them much better than she does you."

"Not now!" said Dr Emery, laughing, and tossing the newcomer from the floor to the ceiling until she shrieked with joy. "Besides, she's such a jolly little thing—just look at her curls and her blue eyes! Won't it be fine when old Mungo can talk like that? And just think what a companion she'll be for him!"

Milly's brow did not relax at all over that consideration: indeed, it only crumpled itself a little more—for Mungo, in the natural course of things, was to have a companion early in the next summer. She did not feel any too well fitted to cope with an additional child inmate of the house at that juncture.

"*Don't* get worried over things without any

reason, darling," said Dr Emery, with a jovial gentleness. "You're thinking about money, aren't you?—I thought so! Well, don't. It's only the starting a nursery that seems such a terrific expense. When it *is* once started, an extra child makes next to no difference at all—you'll see!"

And Milly did see: sitting up wearily late at night, long after she should have been in bed, to replenish the little niece's wardrobe with materials bought with money that represented her own new summer gown. Saw it more clearly still when the alarming increase in her milk-bill made it necessary to economise (for herself; not, of course, for Wilfred) in butcher's meat. Saw it most clearly of all during her toilsome walks with the perambulator, with the little Binkie (who had been christened Beryl Winifred) dragging at her skirts, making terrifying darts into the road, regardless of traffic: finally growing tired, and adding her solid weight to that of Mungo in the perambulator. And all these things Petronella noted, as additional proofs of her theory, with the curious detached interest of one who watches a play on the stage. It never occurred to her that she might have materially lessened Milly's burden—even if at some cost to herself—by lending a hand occasionally, and at least taking over the charge of Binkie for an afternoon now and then. Such things were out of her scope altogether—no part of her Work. One might as well have expected one of

the Muses to lend a gracious hand to some Thracian matron, oppressed with the sordid cares of her household. It was so well understood, in fact, that Petronella lived a life apart and had a right to do so, that Milly never for a moment thought of expecting help from her. Nor did Mrs King, though she was sorely troubled : and got through her own work with amazing speed (by dint of early rising and late going to bed) in order to offer her services to The End House.

It is not to be for a moment supposed that Petronella failed to see Milly's difficulties : or, seeing, did not care. She was immensely impressed with their many disagreeables, and felt an indignant pity for her own Milly, so overtaken. She had, moreover, a grand secret scheme which was to set all this right, and leave herself in the delightful position of Fairy Godmother. With the first cheque from her publishers, she would provide the nursemaid whom Milly so badly needed and could not afford. It was a magnificent plan ; and, with this in view, she waited impatiently for the end of summer, the passing of autumn, the arrival of that great month of November, when Messrs Caledon & Gourlay were to pay the money that had been earned so long before. How Petronella grudged October its many days ! She hardly slept at all for excitement on the night of the thirty-first—as a child lies awake on Christmas Eve. She was fully

dressed long before the postman's arrival was due, and watching eagerly for him from her window. The moment he opened the gate, she would run down.

He passed by without coming in at all.

There was a great deal of the child—the spoilt child—about Petronella, for all her one-and-twenty years. At first she could not believe her eyes. Then, sitting down on her bed, she burst into a storm of passionate tears. She had waited so long ; it had never occurred to her that the advent of November would not end all her suspense. She had pictured a thousand times the pride and joy with which she would fly down to breakfast, waving her cheque before the astounded eyes of her mother : the way in which she would run out to cash it the moment the bank should be open : her rushing in to Milly, to pour gold into her lap, and bid her hurry out immediately to engage the most eligible nurse that could be found. It was very bitter to go down instead with slow steps and a heart of lead, with nothing to show, no appetite for breakfast, no desire but to keep her face from the light, so that Mrs King should not notice the tear-stains on it.

“Nella, you're eating nothing.”

“I've got rather a headache,” Petronella replied, in an unnaturally stiff and level voice.

“*Don't* sit too long over your writing, then——”

Petronella interrupted hastily. "I'm not going to write at all this morning. I'm going out for a long walk."

And out she went : Mrs King (who had been far too tactful to refer in any way to those very obvious tear-stains) watching her wistfully from the window. She had never understood Petronella, and had no hopes of ever doing so ; she lamented, with regretful humility, her own stupidity, that made such a hopeless gulf between herself and her clever daughter. With any other girl it would have been the easiest thing in the world to diagnose a love-affair gone wrong in some way ; but Petronella had never shown herself in the least liable to troubles of that sort. Mrs King, giving up the problem, turned away from the window with an anxious and wistful sigh ; and Petronella walked on towards the Downs at a tremendous pace. Perhaps the fine air up there had power to blow away disagreeables. Perhaps a brief meeting with Mr Vecqueray—though all that they said might have been shouted from the housetops, and no mention of any sort of literary subject was made by either—was not unpleasant. At any rate, Petronella came back from her walk with braced spirits and a cheerful countenance. She had summoned all her philosophy to her aid, and had brought herself to understand that November did not, after all, consist only of one day. She had been childish to pin all her faith

to the first day of the month. The second was even more likely—probably Messrs Caledon & Gourlay despatched all their cheques, in a most business-like way, automatically on the first. But she would not—she *would* not—be overwhelmed with disappointment, even if the next day should fail to bring her what she expected.

It was as well that she had made that resolution ; for, though the postman came to the house the next morning, he had nothing at all for her. She summoned all her patience to her aid, and sat down to wait, as quietly as might be, for the deferred day that must eventually come : that would be all the more delightful for its procrastination.

The month went by—how slowly, Petronella alone knew. With the dawning of the very last day, all her repressed hopes sprang keenly to life again, and she rose trembling with excitement. She might have known that November meant the last day of the month, and not the first. There could now be no further doubt or suspense. Caledon & Gourlay were men of business, and would, of course, keep to the exact letter of their bond.

And the postman, as he had done on the first day of the month, passed by without coming in at all.

For the whole day—an endless, breathless day—Petronella waited in keen suspense. She would not allow herself to give up the hope of which she

had made so certain. When the last post, coming at supper time, brought only a circular for her mother, she fiercely fought down the great lump in her throat that threatened to choke her. The cheque would come next morning, of course ; and Caledon & Gourlay, having posted it while they could still write the date November, would be well within the limits of their bond. And while the new month came in with the small hours, Petronella lay sleepless, restless, staring, with wide open eyes, into the darkness, and longing for half-past seven : experiencing, for the first time in her life, an absolutely white night.

The tardy morning came at last, and the fateful hour, and the postman, with a sheaf of letters for Clematis Cottage. Petronella, fully dressed and downstairs long before he was due, received them at the door, and turned them over with shaking hands. There was not one for her of any sort.

She faced the inevitable truth, with all the bravery that she could muster to her aid. Caledon & Gourlay had played her false, had broken the formal signed contract, which had seemed to her as binding as an Act of Parliament. Her vague, feminine belief in the business habits of business men had received the rudest of shocks ; and her world seemed tottering on its foundations. She felt bewildered and half-stunned. She had pinned her faith so absolutely to this one event, that she could not understand what was to be done next, now

that it had failed to happen. She longed impotently for some trusty counsellor whose advice she could ask ; but the next instant found herself furiously rejecting the thought of Sarah, the only person whom she knew of as able and ready to advise. No ! she could not confess her humiliation—better any amount of waiting and suspense than that ! There must be some mistake—her own, of course. She must set herself to wait again ; and, above all, to hide from her little world the fact that she was so waiting.

The days of December went very slowly by ; and Petronella found her task a heavy one. It was hard not to watch and listen for the postman, not to show obvious eagerness about the letters he brought, and even more obvious disappointment when the nature of them had been ascertained. It was hard to see Milly labouring patiently on, overburdened, never murmuring : when by rights she should have been already supplied with the nurse who was to relieve her of the heaviest part of her work. Petronella's bewildered disappointment began to pass rapidly into indignation. Caledon & Gourlay had no *right* to keep her money from her—the money that she had honestly earned over a year ago ! She had a vision of writing to remonstrate, and demand her own. She even sat down pen in hand, one day, in an access of wrath, when Milly had come in from a muddy, muggy walk, and had fainted quietly in

her own drawing-room ; and then shrank back frightened at the colossal daring of the idea. Who was she, after all, to question the rightfulness of those great abstractions, Caledon & Gourlay ? She did not know in the least how to word her complaint ; she was afraid first of being too humble, then of being too bold. Suppose her writing such a letter should be a breach of some great unknown publishing law ? Suppose they should be furiously angry with her ; should even refuse—dreadful thought ! — to have anything further to do with her and her books ? Petronella, trembling, put down her pen, and resolved rather to bear the ills she had than fly to others that she knew not of.

It was not until Christmas was over—the most restless, unsatisfactory Christmas she had ever known—that another thought struck her, dazzling in its novelty. It might be that, amid all the vast claims upon them, her publishers had overlooked Petronella's modest share—by this time she had begun to rate it very modestly indeed, and to doubt if the nurse for Milly would be within her means at all. It might even be the custom for authors to write at the proper time, enclosing a stamped envelope for their cheque—as one enclosed a stamped envelope for rejected manuscripts. This brilliant idea had no sooner dawned upon her, than it became the obvious solution of the inexplicable problem. Petronella sat down at her

desk, as the bells were ringing out the Old Year, and with shaking hands indited a humble note, recalling herself to the memory of those Great Ones, reminding them of their contract, and enclosing the fateful envelope. It seemed to her a good omen that, as she ran out bare-headed in the frosty night to post her missive, the New Year bells met her with a jubilant clash and clangour of good tidings. How foolish she had been not to think before of this solution of the mystery ! She might have had her money—and Milly her nursemaid—the best part of two months ago.

For a whole week she waited hopefully, fearfully, excitedly ; at last in rising indignation. Finally, the indignation getting altogether the upper hand—it could not be right that her letter should be entirely ignored !—she wrote again ; quite a stiff, offended little letter, stating that she could not understand why no answer had reached her. And, by return post after that, her long suspense was at last ended : though when she actually did hold the long-expected envelope in her shaking hand she had scarcely the courage to open it. With remorse she felt that she had bitterly wronged Messrs Caledon & Gourlay by her doubts of them. Her first letter had obviously been lost in the post. To her second they had replied with all possible promptness.

She drew out of the envelope—oh, how slowly and breathlessly !—a typewritten letter. But

there was no cheque : no enclosure of any sort. Bewildered, she began to read and try to understand.

Messrs Caledon & Gourlay regretted, with a profusion of formal apologies, that her earlier letter had failed to reach them. They regretted, also, a slight misunderstanding which appeared to exist respecting the royalties on *Angela Trevor*. They begged to refer Miss King to Clause Four of the signed Agreement between themselves and her.

And Petronella, more bewildered than ever, fetched that formidable document from its locked drawer, and sat down to puzzle over its intricate wording.

"All copies sold of the said work within six months of the date of publication shall carry no royalty to the author, but on all copies sold after the expiration of the first six months after publication, the publisher agrees to pay——"

Petronella looked up, with dazed eyes and a scared, white face. In the first flush and pride of acceptance, she had failed to notice, or at any rate to understand, that deadly stipulation : which now was all too clear. There was no money due to her at all. There would be none till, at earliest, next May. Four months more to wait—and Milly every day less able to support her burden, and more urgently in need of help ! Hot and bitter tears dripped slowly through Petronella's locked fingers—so that she wiped

them off with frightened haste. Things were quite bad enough as they were. She could not afford to blur into doubtfulness any of the poor little rights that still remained to her.

Taking up the fateful letter again, to lock it away with the Agreement and her other business papers, she found that she had not read it to the very end. Messrs Caledon & Gourlay asked for information as to when they might expect the manuscript of her next novel. They even seemed, in a temperate way, a little eager to have it; and Petronella's mercurial spirits went up with a sudden bound of relief. Scanning the Agreement breathlessly, she found that the damnatory part of Clause Four only held good with regard to *Angela Trevor*. With all subsequent novels, she was to receive her royalties from the very beginning—and she found herself laughing aloud, from sheer relief and joy. How she had wronged her publishers! Had they not explained to her, quite honourably at the beginning, that a very great risk attended inevitably the publication of a first novel, and that they felt bound to safeguard themselves against possible loss? They had been entirely within their rights; and Petronella had only her own ignorance to blame for her bitter disappointment. The future shone out again, rosy with hope. True, it was very irksome to have to wait long months yet for her money—but

And Sir Theodore, who had all his life been a man of his word, did not return for lunch: then, or ever after. For his horse, stumbling into a rabbit-hole, threw the old man in so awkward a manner that he broke that proverbially stiff neck of his, and so was brought home on a hurdle, in the late evening, by a couple of labourers who had chanced to pass where he lay. And if the accident had occurred on his homeward instead of on his outward journey, when he had interviewed his lawyer and satisfactorily dictated another will, it would have made all the difference to certain unconscious women in a little Sussex town.

For the new Sir Theodore, a stolid, unimaginative young man, had been only a schoolboy at the time of his brother Peter's disgrace, and had never had more than the vaguest ideas respecting its cause. He did not so much as know of the existence of his sister-in-law: still less of his nieces. He knew that the unsatisfactory Peter was dead years ago—the natural consequence, it would seem, of failing to give satisfaction to the grim old father—and there, for all he knew, the matter naturally ended. Nor was there anyone to enlighten him: for the old lawyer, who had drawn up the old Sir Theodore's old will, had been dead many years, and his successor knew nothing of Peter's widow and children.

CHAPTER XIII

PETRONELLA'S PUBLISHERS SEND A CHEQUE

As the days lengthened, and the cold strengthened, Petronella sat diligently at her desk, rising early, going to bed late, scarcely giving herself time for rest or exercise, bent only upon fulfilling her promise to the letter. And so at last, when February was within a week of its end, she thankfully locked the cover of her typewriter ; and sat, in the momentary idleness that is very grateful after overwork, turning over the leaves of her finished manuscript. There is a well-known saying about easy writing. If the converse holds good, Petronella's new novel should prove easy reading indeed, for she had found it a most strenuous task. From the very beginning, the plot had refused to unfold itself with the steady inevitability of *Angela Trevor*. It had been written and re-written : for even in Petronella's partial eyes the later actions of her characters were quite inconsistent with their doings in the earlier chapters. To the last, her hero had remained a man of wood in her hands ; and it had been

necessary to expatiate, over and over again, on the charms of her heroine, who absolutely refused to display them for herself. It would have been possible to end the book in two different ways ; and even now Petronella was by no means convinced that she had made the right choice. The title alone had cost her many hours of sleeplessness ; and the one which she had eventually chosen in desperation—*Adelaide's Fortune*—did not either please or satisfy her. At any rate, she had the satisfaction of finding her task done at last, well within the stipulated time. She made up her parcel and despatched it with immense relief ; and so returned home again, vowing that she would not put pen to paper again for at least a month to come. By that time, the acceptance would have been sent from Messrs Caledon & Gourlay—it was expressly arranged in the agreement that a month should be the extreme limit of their time for considering a manuscript—and that would give her the necessary fillip to start once more. At present, she felt as if no plot, for either novel or short story, would ever come into her jaded brain again.

Sarah's third novel, which appeared in March, made a great deal more stir than either of its predecessors. Its queer title, *Fossy*, alone attracted readers ; its subject-matter raised a howl of indignation throughout the country. For it drew, with an unsparing hand, the life of the phosphorus

workers : it expounded the grim meaning of "fossy-jaw" : it made one—as Mrs King said, weeping tears of pity and terror—"ashamed to strike a match."

"That's what I *meant* it to do," said Sarah, very grim.

"But how did you know all this, Sarah?" Petronella asked slowly. Sarah's uncanny knowledge of things in general was, of course, proverbial. But this—this was something different and inexplicable.

"Know? I didn't know—how should I?"

"Then who told you?"

"What's the good of *telling*?" said Sarah impatiently. "Second-hand knowledge is never worth anything! I happened to hear a little—enough to make me want to know more; and then I went and found out for myself."

"You actually *went*—to these places?" said Petronella, aghast. "In that month last summer—when you came back looking so ill, and never would say where you had been?"

Sarah nodded, grinning.

"And they told you *all this*?" Petronella fluttered the leaves of the book with a horrified gesture.

"My dear Nella, haven't I said already that second-hand knowledge is no good?" said Sarah, with fresh impatience. "They probably *wouldn't* have told me—anything worth knowing. If

you want to find out about that sort of thing, you've got to try it for yourself."

"And you actually went——"

"And lived there—yes, and did the work," Sarah affirmed, nodding.

"But—how horrible it must have been!"

Sarah glanced up, with one of her odd, quick looks.

"You can stand almost anything—if you know exactly when it's going to end. But—you saw what a month of it did for me! And what about the people who live all their lives there: even if they aren't very long lives?"

"It's too horrible! I hate thinking of it!" Petronella cried.

"But it's *got* to be thought of, if anything is ever going to be done," said Sarah.

"What in the world made you think of doing it, Sarah?" said Petronella; and fear and loathing were in her face and voice.

Sarah paused a minute or two.

"My writing gift's a queer one, you see," she said at last. "I can do horrors rather well: I can make people's flesh creep—and I suppose I could have gone on inventing that sort of thing without much difficulty. But what's the good of throwing a little more rubbish on to a pile that's already much too big? If people like to be frightened, they'd much better scream at real bogies than at sham ones—and then perhaps they'll do some-

thing towards getting rid of them. Goodness knows, there are plenty of real bogies in the world, a great deal worse than anything I could invent !”

A reluctant admiration was slowly getting the better of the horror in Petronella's face.

“And how proud you'll feel when you see something really being done—and know that you began it all !”

Sarah laughed her abrupt, harsh laugh, and Petronella's rising enthusiasm received a sudden chill that was very disconcerting.

“I don't expect my Awful Revelations to have any enormous effect, Nella.”

“But think of the reviews—and that Leading Article !” cried Petronella.

“I know. People are quite excited, just for the moment—I really never hoped they would be thrilled. But in a week or two there will be a big railway accident, or a big divorce case, and then—who'll remember poor *Fossy* ?”

“But—then, what did you write it for ?” Petronella queried, sorely taken aback.

“Because what you *can* do, you've *got* to do,” said Sarah, standing very square and firm, and staring up with her odd light eyes. “I'm fortunate enough to know the one thing I can do, and see the one way in which it can be made of use. I'm not an optimist—I don't expect to move the world. But, if I do all that's in me to do, the result isn't in my hands—thank goodness !”

"Then you do expect it will do some good?"

"I expect nothing—I hope a very little," said Sarah impatiently. "Good gracious, Nella, go back to your babyhood and remember 'Little drops of water, little grains of sand!' What's the good of worrying as to the size of one's drop of water? The only thing we need see about is that we put it into the right bucket!"

It seemed a very simple philosophy. There was no apparent reason why it should have left Petronella—as it undoubtedly did—uneasy, restless, and half-offended.

The month of March, going out like a lamb, left the inhabitants of Clematis Cottage in a state of some perturbation. There were reasons why Mrs King had been unusually desirous of the quarterly allowance that was due to her at Lady Day. For one thing, she had spent a good deal of money on Milly and on preparations for the coming baby. For another, she had always made a practice of paying all annual subscriptions on the first of January: which, if it rather crippled her resources at the beginning of the year, certainly left her most agreeably free for the other three quarters. Her religion was of the old-fashioned order that believes devoutly in giving away a tenth—more, possibly, but certainly never less; and, though much of this went in unostentatious charity to her poorer neighbours, her regular subscriptions mounted up to quite a considerable

sum. But, besides these perfectly open reasons for the desirability of quarter-day, there was also a faint anxiety which she would not acknowledge, even to herself. Indeed, what was there to be anxious about? she asked herself reprovingly. True, she had of course seen accounts of Sir Theodore's death; but she had implicit confidence in his word, and had he not written formally to her, all those years ago, to assure her that he had provided definitely for the future of herself and her girls? The money would doubtless come, just as regularly as it had always. Or, if not with quite Sir Theodore's scrupulous regularity—she said to herself, when quarter-day was already more than a week past,—come at least it would, in good time, with undeniable certainty. The present Sir Theodore was young, and new to his position. It was not reasonable to expect that he would be able to take up immediately all the precise ways of his father; but there was not the smallest, remotest cause for any real anxiety as to the coming of the money. For Mrs King, needless to say, knew nothing at all of the will that had been burnt, and the other will that had never been made, and it never occurred to her that the new Sir Theodore was ignorant of her very existence. Even the old man's cheque-book told no tales that might have helped her cause; for he conducted all business relating to his disgraced son in a fashion peculiar to himself, sending the

quarterly allowance unfailingly in the form of bank-notes in a registered envelope—and even that was always posted at a distance from Kynings, to avoid the curiosity of local post-offices. The trail had been covered in every direction with a fox-like ingenuity—too well covered, it appeared now, for the future of Peter's widow.

Mrs King was not, of course, in any immediate straits for money. She was naturally a thrifty woman ; and, though during Peter's lifetime it had been impossible to save a penny, she had put by yearly sums of varying amount ever since his death : even during the expensive years when both girls were at school—even after the outlay involved by the simple pomps of Milly's wedding. Her financial position, after that great event, was practically just the same as it had been before ; for she gave Milly a definite allowance of fifty pounds a year—besides all the little incidental presents that a mother loves to give, and a grandmother cannot refrain from giving. If no more money came from Kynings—a possibility at which she just began to allow herself to glance with dismay—that allowance must stop, perforce, and Milly's already narrow means would be most uncomfortably narrowed still further. For herself, Mrs King cared practically nothing ; she was almost a young woman still, and entirely capable of earning her own living in half a dozen different ways. Nor did she trouble greatly about Petronella

—who was quite certain to marry : or, in the unimaginable contingency that she remained single, was so clever that she could of course make a livelihood for herself without the smallest difficulty. But Milly ! If anything could have induced Mrs King to put her pride in her pocket and write to her unknown brother-in-law, it would have been the thought of patient, overworked Milly, with a new heavy burden added to those which she already bore without complaint. But the fact remained that Mrs King had a great deal of pride—a manifestly absurd possession for a tenant-farmer's daughter. She could accept, for herself and her girls, the continued allowance which had been made to her husband by his father ; but she would have worked her fingers to the bone rather than ask for it, if it had not been offered. In the present case, her foolish pride was so excessive that she was rather relieved than otherwise to find that she had lost the letter in which Sir Theodore stated his intention of providing for her. For Milly's sake, she might just have prevailed upon herself to send that to the new Sir Theodore. Without it, or any other shadow of proof, she certainly would not dream of making a claim of any sort. The matter might still be set right, and the allowance be sent as before. She could afford to wait a little and see ; but in the meantime she would look out quietly for the sort of post that would be likely to suit her.

Naturally, nothing of all this was told to Petronella ; who, for her own part, had her own private worries, and also said nothing about them. The stipulated month—nay, six weeks—had passed since her second novel had been despatched : but the answer promised in the Agreement had not reached her. It was, of course, an excellent sign, the best of signs, that they were not going to reject it : though, indeed, she believed that she had never really feared that. Still, she would have liked the satisfaction of certainty, the joy of announcing that she had another novel coming out—at such a time. She knew that the manuscript had reached its destination safely ; not only had she registered it for security, but she had actually received an acknowledgment from Messrs Caledon & Gourlay—rather a tardy acknowledgment, dated nearly a week after she had sent it off. Presumably the stipulated month would be counted from then ; but, after six and seven weeks had gone, Petronella began to grow very restive and uneasy. Her publishers, it was to be supposed, concluded that she would never contemplate the possibility of rejection, and so had not troubled to write any formal acceptance : her first definite information would probably take the form of proof-sheets. Still it was not business-like—in view of the very definite terms of the Agreement ; and Petronella at last screwed up her courage and wrote—a very meek note.

What a dreadful thing it would be if she should annoy those all-powerful beings, so that they sent back her manuscript in wrath and declined to have anything more to do with her ! She was quite nervous, for a day or two, of the parcel-post. But when a week had passed, without any sort of acknowledgment of either her manuscript or her letter, her courage revived, and some indignation also ; and she wrote again.

"Nella," said Mrs King two days later, "there's a parcel for you."

A parcel ? Petronella turned red and white, and her breath came in gasps. It need not, of course, be from Caledon & Gourlay at all : but some deadly instinct warned her——

It was *Adelaide's Fortune*, much crumpled and soiled, very badly packed in thin paper. Enclosed was a note of a terrible conclusive brevity. Messrs Caledon & Gourlay regretted that press of business had prevented their returning the MS. earlier ; they regretted also that they did not see their way to publishing it. They could assure Miss King that their reader, after very careful consideration, did not consider the book in any way up to the standard of her previous work.

Pale Petronella dropped the letter on her desk, and stood staring at the battered manuscript. Indignation and misery fought for the mastery of her. They might at least have returned it sooner. They might at least have treated it with

decent care. It was almost too dirty to send on to another publisher ; and yet go it must, and at once—she did not want it in her sight for another moment ! She hastily typed a letter and a fresh title-page, hunted up an address, and rushed out to the post with her shameful parcel. No pride, no glowing hopes this time. She would accept any terms, if only she might escape the ignominy of complete rejection.

In three days the manuscript returned to her, a little dirtier, perhaps, and with the title-page missing altogether. And again Petronella patched up its worst injuries, and despatched it in another direction, before it had been in the house half an hour.

By the middle of May, the unfortunate novel had visited eleven publishers, and had been unconditionally rejected by all. Petronella had no longer to complain of undue delay ; it never remained anywhere more than a few days. Nor had she to complain, on the whole, of want of courtesy, for the regrets accompanying it were usually expressed with extreme politeness. One publisher, indeed, went so far as to own to an acquaintance with *Angela Trevor*, and to hint that if this new book had been on the same level he might have considered its publication. In the end, it became too disgracefully torn and soiled to be fit for sending any further ; and Petronella, loathing it by this time far too much to dream of

re-typing the whole, showed a strength of mind which did her credit. She tore out the paper clips, stuffed the dirty sheets into the empty little grate in her study, and set fire to them—and then turned and ran out of the room, with tears pouring down her cheeks. She could not endure to stand by and watch the destruction of what had been the labour of so many months. She felt old, depressed, utterly world-weary.

And, since troubles proverbially do not come alone, it was that very same evening that Mrs King came down from an afternoon spent in her bedroom—in itself an almost unprecedented event—flushed and unwell, with a violent headache and no appetite. Once roused from her apathy of misery, Petronella was frightened. Finding that her mother could not make even a pretence of eating supper, she urged her to go to bed, and was freshly alarmed when Mrs King accepted the suggestion with relief, not demurring in the least.

“Hadn’t I better ask Wilfred to run in and see you?” Petronella suggested, helping her to undress—and additionally terrified to find that such help was very necessary indeed. And Mrs King, instead of resisting such an idea tooth and nail—which would have been her normal attitude—only said weakly that perhaps it would be as well.

Petronella scribbled a hasty note with shaking hands—she would not go herself, for fear that Milly should hear her voice and be alarmed—and

sent it next door ; and Dr Emery came at once, almost equally disturbed by the unheard-of situation. Mrs King's natural mission in life was the care of other people. To find her, instead, needing attention and nursing for herself was as if the sun should rise in the west.

"Probably influenza," he said, on hearing what Petronella had to tell ; and an interview with the patient confirmed that diagnosis. It was that unpleasant novelty of the 'nineties, the so-called Russian influenza that mowed down its victims broadcast without warning, and drained them of all vitality and strength as successfully as other illnesses of a dozen times the duration.

"A severe attack," said Dr Emery ; and he looked very serious indeed over it. He was extremely fond of Milly's mother, but his dismay was more than half for Milly herself. At the time of Mungo's arrival, Grandmamma had been invaluable. What were they to do without her now, when the second baby was expected almost immediately ? He gave his directions to Petronella very gloomily—"beef-tea, and Benger, and keep the room at the same temperature,"—and departed in sore dismay, leaving her much more sorely dismayed behind him.

It was such a May as the poets seem never to have encountered—a month of chill winds, with nights rather colder than those of the average December. Mrs King had never had a fire in her

bedroom since Petronella was born. Not unnaturally, the chimney was damp and the fire refused to draw; and Petronella and the little maid, wrestling with it, were fairly smoke-dried before they could induce it to burn at all. Poor Mrs King lay flushed and aching in her bed, coughing irrepressibly when the puffs of smoke came farther than usual in her direction; but she was very grateful, only anxious that no one should worry or spend a broken night on her behalf, only desirous to make it clearly understood that she wanted nothing but a little milk—and rest.

"But Wilfred said beef-tea and Benger," Petronella protested, with an anxious frown.

Mrs King gave a faint laugh. "There's no Benger in the house—and you can't make beef-tea without beef, Nella; and of course the shops are all shut long ago. No, just let me be quiet. I daresay I shall be much better in the morning."

It is needless to say that she was not better, but worse—too ill to do anything but lie in a half-stupefied state, only conscious of aching intolerably from head to foot. To Petronella—whose night had been much broken by certain anxious, dutiful pilgrimages to keep up the sickroom fire—life presented a very grey and dreary aspect. Things were wrong from the very beginning, with breakfast twenty minutes late. Afterwards, when the little servant asked for the day's orders, Petronella realised depressingly that she had not

the faintest idea of what should be ordered, or of what was already in the house. The little servant, unluckily, was very young, very raw, and had only arrived the week before. It suited Mrs King, financially and personally, to engage inexperienced maids and train them herself to a high pitch of efficiency ; but it was certainly unfortunate that this particular individual happened to belong to that dangerous class which impedes the good work of the world more effectually perhaps than any other—the class that will never stoop to say : “I don’t know.” When Petronella said “The doctor says my mother must have beef-tea, Bertha. Do you know how to make it?” Bertha assented with the utmost cheerfulness and goodwill. Petronella, fully aware of her own ignorance, was only too thankful to leave all the responsibility in other hands, from the purchasing of the meat onwards : and subsequently carried up to Mrs King, with sore misgivings, a thin, greyish-brown liquid, boiling hot, with greasy globules floating on its surface, thick as the leaves in Vallambrosa. Mrs King nobly controlled the shiver that ran through her at the mere sight of it ; but after one taste she was obliged to put down her spoon.

“I’m afraid it’s not quite right,” said Petronella, with tears in her eyes. She was devoted to her mother, and would fain have had everything of a sickroom perfection.

"I don't seem to fancy it," said poor Mrs King. "Perhaps—if you'd beat up an egg in a little milk, Nella, I might manage it better."

Now an egg may be so beaten and mixed and prepared as to be a food for the gods ; but it may also, in inexperienced hands, become a thing of horror, calculated to disgust the most robust appetite. Every mistake that could possibly be made was made in due order by the luckless Petronella ; and she had the mortification of seeing her decoction declined with a real irrepressible shudder of horror.

"Never mind, darling. A little milk, please," Mrs King petitioned feebly.

Petronella, retiring disconsolate with the second rejected tray, found the first left neglected on the kitchen table, more loathsome than ever, with splashes of cold grease all over it ; and fell to reproaching Bertha, the self-confident.

"I thought you said you *knew* how to make beef-tea !"

"Well, miss, if I ain't attilly made it meself, I've watched it done a many times !" Bertha defended herself, unabashed.

"At any rate, please put all this horrid mess away at once !" cried Petronella, with a tragic gesture towards the table. It never occurred to her that she might perform that small office herself, or offer help in any other part of the housework. When she saw Bertha complying

slowly, with a highly aggrieved air, the young mistress only thought that the young servant was a very sulky girl.

She had had some faint hope that Milly might be well enough to come in : not, of course, to do anything herself, but to watch and direct, and give invaluable help in the way of sage advice. But this hope was promptly dashed to the ground by Wilfred's face when he entered.

"Milly's ill," he announced gloomily. "I've just been to fetch her nurse. Don't tell your mother, of course. I suppose, Nella, you couldn't have the children for the rest of the day?"

"Of course I will," Petronella declared, with much gallantry of manner and a very sinking heart.

So Binkie and little Mungo duly came in, charmed with the novelty ; and Petronella entertained them in her little study, because the noise of them would be least likely to penetrate thence to Mrs King's room. It was a fresh grievance to Bertha that she must poach eggs for their dinner, and make a milk pudding ; and Petronella had the sore trial of watching, helpless, her precious little retreat defiled by splashes of food, of seeing little sticky hands fingering, between mouthfuls, the neat writing apparatus all arranged in order on her desk. She was prepared to bear anything, if only they would not cry and betray their presence to her mother ; so she bowed before a

rooted determination not to go to bed, told stories to Binkie until her throat was sore and her brain reeling, and rode Mungo on her knee until she was quite stiff. The experience was all the more trying from its novelty ; for always hitherto the children had been managed with the view that "Auntie Nella must not be worried," and Grand-mamma or Mummy had spirited them away at any sign of difficulty. But now, with no one to relieve guard, Petronella must struggle alone with all the drawbacks of inexperience : an exhausting process, coupled with ceaseless anxiety about her mother, lying upstairs in a half-sleep, and Milly suffering next door. Tea-time came, but no tea ; and Petronella, fairly worn-out, could have cried with delight when her brother-in-law dashed in to announce that the new baby was a girl, and that Milly had done very well indeed. The children flew to him ; and Petronella escaped to pay a flying visit to her mother, and then to the kitchen.

"Lor ! You don't ever mean to say it's as late as that ?" cried Bertha, sitting comfortably by the fire, in a horribly untidy condition, reading a penny novelette. But literature and the excitement of the news had restored her good temper ; and she not only promised to "fly" with the tea, but to give the children theirs in the kitchen, while Petronella attended to her mother.

The news of the baby's advent so excited Mrs King, that it roused her fairly from her lethargy,

and made her look more herself at once. Wilfred reported favourably on her ; and Petronella, her mercurial spirits rising, began to hope that the worst of her troubles were over. She ran in to see Milly : found her niece unexpectedly well-favoured, for a person of so few hours' experience of life : and had quite a merry time, in her relief, over the bathing and putting to bed of Binkie and Mungo. To-morrow, she hoped, things would resume pretty much their normal course.

But it was her first encounter with the influenza fiend, and she was quite unprepared for the peculiar subtleties of his method with his victims. Mrs King was undoubtedly better the next morning : able to sit up in bed, to take the keenest interest in her granddaughter, and to lament bitterly that she herself should have been laid low at such an interesting crisis. True, she refused firmly all suggestions of soup and orthodox invalid diet, and confined herself to a diet of milk and bread-and-butter. She did this so tactfully that Petronella never suspected the cause, and was only delighted that her mother should feel too well to need the usual sickroom slops. Mrs King began to talk of getting up, and was inclined to rebel when her son-in-law insisted that she should stay in bed ; and Petronella, who found things exceedingly comfortless downstairs, and did not in the least know how to set about bettering them, agreed in thinking that Wilfred was over-careful.

At this juncture Sarah, who had been away for some weeks, came home : looking so ill that Petronella exclaimed at the sight of her. "Where *have* you been ?" she cried.

"Pulling fur in the East End," said Sarah, in a husky voice, with a grin and a cough. "Beugh ! Don't ask questions, Nella ; you wouldn't like it if I answered them.—You needn't be afraid of me. I've been thoroughly washed and disinfected. I might handle Milly's baby without danger ! But I feel as if I were filled with fluff up to *here*." She put her hand to her throat, and coughed again. "How's your mother, Nella ?"

"Oh, much better ! I hope she'll be down to-morrow," said Petronella sanguinely. "You're not afraid to come and see her ?"

"Pooh !" said Sarah ; and marched straight into the house and upstairs. "It's easy to see that Mrs King isn't about," she said, pausing on the landing, with a searching glance round.

Petronella blushed rosily. "Bertha's very young," she offered as apology.

"So are you, of course !" was Sarah's enigmatic answer ; and she knocked at the door of the sickroom.

Now Petronella had honestly done her best for her mother's comfort ; but utter inexperience, combined with a singular want of observation, is terribly inefficient at the best. Sarah, crossing the room to the bedside, noticed—more things

than Petronella had noticed in all the days of her mother's illness.

"Nella, I'm horribly thirsty. Get me a glass of water, will you?" she said abruptly.

"Of course!" and Petronella ran downstairs with the utmost goodwill.

"Now, then!" said Sarah; and in a trice had whipped out her handkerchief, and was dusting and arranging a little table where medicine bottles and used crockery stood in great disorder. But Mrs King, flushed and sitting upright, stretched out a protesting hand.

"No, Sarah! Please! Nella will think she has not managed well——"

"She hasn't," said Sarah plumply, going on with her work.

"But she's done her very best, and she looks so tired. Oh, please! I wouldn't hurt her feelings for anything!"

"Let me straighten the bedclothes, at least, and shake up your pillow—and dust the mantelpiece. Why, it must be torture to *you* to lie and look at things like this!"

Mrs King smiled oddly. "I'd rather you left it all just as it is, please, Sarah. It's only for a day or two longer, you see."

Sarah pocketed her handkerchief, and sat down abruptly, with her observant eyes fixed on her friend. "What a queer thing it must be to be a mother!" she said; and laughed.

And then Petronella came back with the water in a glass that was dull and smeared, and wet at the bottom.

Sarah sipped at it with a private grimace, and put it down on the washstand.

"How do you think mother is looking?" Petronella asked anxiously.

"As if she hadn't had much to eat," Sarah replied, with her customary downrightness.

Mrs King flushed faintly. "One can't take much when one is ill," she disclaimed hastily.

"One doesn't *want* to; but one's *got* to," said Sarah. "What does Dr Emery allow?"

"He says she may have chicken and fish now; but I can't get her to take anything at all except milk and bread-and-butter," said Petronella.

"I really seem to like that best," Mrs King interposed again with haste.

"Oh!" said Sarah; and shut her lips very tight. "And now I'd better go. You'll be tired."

Downstairs in the hall she faced Petronella. "I happen to know a great recipe for egg jelly. May I come downstairs and make her some now?"

"Oh, if she'd eat it I should be only too glad! But she won't *touch* anything that has eggs in it," said Petronella distressfully.

"Let's try this once more, anyhow," said Sarah;

and whisked abruptly downstairs to the kitchen. And there stood still.

"My *word*!" she said; and the exceeding force of the ejaculation added to its inelegance. "Well, Nella, this will have to be put right before your mother gets down again. The mere sight of it is enough to give her a relapse!"

Petronella, scarlet, began some feeble murmured apologies and excuses, in regard of Bertha's youth and inexperience. But Sarah, heeding her not at all, set to work with a wrathful brow: scrupulously washing—not unnecessarily—every spoon and scrap of kitchenware that she would need, before any attempt at actual cookery. She was extraordinarily quick, in her ungraceful way, in everything that she did. Bertha, considerably astonished, found herself scrubbing the table and finding it no easy task: but she scrubbed with quite a good will, because this strange young lady, who had appeared out of nowhere like a whirlwind, was herself working a great deal harder, and seemed to know everything that there was to know about cooking and a kitchen.

"No, I'll take it up myself," said Sarah, when all was finished, and the result daintily set out on a shining plate, marshalled by a shining spoon and fork. "And to-morrow, Nella, I'll spend the day here, if you please, and get things a little ship-shape again."

"Won't Dr Garnett want you?" said Petro-

nella : intensely relieved, but a little scrupulous of taking too much of the busy Sarah's time.

"Not half so much as your house," said Sarah, looking back with a grin and a twinkle, as she carried her tray upstairs.

So Petronella had extensive evidence—if she had needed it ; but indeed it had never occurred to her to wonder at the admirable order of Sarah's servantless home—that a person who writes books may also be a person who excels in housework. And Sarah, cleaning and scrubbing (and making Petronella clean and scrub too, in a very elementary way), talked books with crispness and thorough enjoyment. Amongst other recent novels they came in due course to *Trilby* ; and Petronella emphatically declared disbelief in its central theme.

"How *could* a girl imagine that she was singing all right, when she was simply making discords ?" she said with scorn.

"People aren't always their own best judges," quoth Sarah, scrubbing away at a neglected saucepan as if her life depended on it. "Now, then, Nella, no scamping ! You've not touched that corner at all."

Petronella returned on her tracks with perfect good temper, and attended to the corner ; which she had not neglected from any wilful desire to shirk, but from sheer want of observation. But she avenged and justified herself mildly by observing :

"Of course, Trilby never supposed that singing counted for anything particular in her life. What people do really well is their real Work—naturally."

Sarah drew herself up suddenly from her stooping position, with a breath so sharply expelled that it was almost a whistle.

"So you don't think that people usually do anything with all their might except the one thing that happens to please them best?"

"I—don't think I said that. I certainly didn't mean it," said Petronella, flushed and somewhat taken aback. For it could not be supposed that Sarah's lifework was the scouring of saucepans—especially when they were not even her own; and yet she was as intent on that inelegant occupation as if she had no other thought in the world.

"And you don't think it possible for a person to make a mistake?" Sarah's harsh voice rang out with a sharpness that was quite extraordinary.

"In their Vocation! Oh, no! How could that be possible?" And now Petronella's enthusiastic colour was charming to behold, and her large eyes were full of light and eagerness. She knelt upright on the floor and stretched out both hands with a quick gesture.

Sarah stood staring at her for a moment, with a sharp half-sigh and a queer half-smile. But all she said, in a blatantly prosaic tone, was:

"Take care! You'll let all that dirty water run

up your sleeve—and I don't know a more loathsome sensation, in a small way ! ”

Petronella lowered her scrubbing-brush quickly, feeling as if she had been jerked awake without warning from a deeply interesting dream. But that was the one great drawback to friendship with Sarah. You could not make her walk with you on the heights for any length of time ; she preferred the safe level of prose, and saw to it that her companions descended thither as soon as possible.

“ Now,” she observed with satisfaction a little later, “ you needn't be afraid for Mrs King to come downstairs ! ”

“ It really has been tremendously good of you, Sarah,” said Petronella, aching all over from the thousand and one distasteful tasks that were all finished ; compelled to own, as she looked round, the difference between to-day and yesterday in the kitchen.

“ I'd do a good deal more than this for your mother—or for you either, Nella,” said Sarah with a jerk. “ Don't be too hard on that Bertha child ! She has the makings of a good little maid, and, as you say, she's very young.”

Next day Mrs King tottered feebly downstairs for the first time, an event to which Petronella had been looking forward with the utmost eagerness. But the reality proved, as is so often the case, something unpleasantly different from her expectations ;

for it could be seen immediately, even by her inexperienced eyes, that her mother would not be capable for many a day of resuming her reins of office as of old. It was sorely disconcerting to see capable Mrs King sitting weak and trembling by the fireside, entirely unable to make up her own mind about anything, ready to dissolve into tears if any matter were unduly urged upon her. Petronella, greatly alarmed, ran privately in next-door to confide this distressing state of things to Wilfred, and ask what it meant; and was both relieved and dismayed when she learnt that it was only the normal result of a visit from the influenza fiend.

"But mother *will* get all right again?" she questioned fearfully.

"Oh, dear, yes!" cried Dr Emery, with the utmost cheerfulness. His own domestic anxieties were over, Milly was doing as well as possible, the new baby was strong and pretty and well-behaved; and his buoyant spirits were at their highest.

"Soon? *How* soon?" urged Petronella.

"Oh, you mustn't expect her to be anything like herself again for a week or two, of course. It was a sharp attack; and she will take time to pick up her strength again. There's nothing to worry about, Nella. Just let her rest and do nothing, and make her take plenty of good nourishing food!"

And Petronella returned home again, relieved, indeed, of anxiety, but very much discomfited. Her difficulties were by no means at an end, then—her struggles with Bertha and the house-keeping, her continual humiliating discoveries of her own ignorance and incompetence. It would be almost worse than before, now that her mother would be actually sitting by and seeing how terribly she mismanaged things.

But possibly the spirits that love to torment poor humanity had wearied of this particular game; for matters proved by no means so bad as they might have been. Perhaps Bertha had profited by the influence of Sarah's brief and brisk reign, or perhaps it was only the eye of the mistress that had its effect. Certainly Petronella put her shoulder to the wheel as she had never done in all her life before, and worked hard and anxiously, coming with extreme humility to her mother for advice regarding the most prosaic details: so that Mrs King was fain to laugh irrepressibly more than once—which was very good for her. For worst of all the legacies of influenza is its dreadful mental weakness and depression; and Mrs King was hardly recognisable for her old bright, hopeful self. She saw now the black side of everything—sometimes could not even see that there was any bright side possible; and, in one of these downcast moods, she confided suddenly to the dismayed

Petronella her anxieties about money, and the non-arrival of her quarterly cheque.

"It won't come now, any more," said Mrs King, with the resignation of despair.

"But it may have been only an oversight, for once. They will remember at the June quarter!" urged Petronella.

"Oh, no! There's not the smallest chance of that," said Mrs King; and she folded her hands (which were most uncharacteristically white and thin now) quite hopelessly, while two forlorn tears trickled down her cheeks.

Petronella could not bear that: especially as she found it impossible altogether to believe Wilfred's assurances that all this depression was due to influenza and would not last. She ran away to her little study and walked up and down there, crying too—not for the money difficulty, but because her mother was so greatly distressed about it. Then suddenly she stopped crying and stood still, with clasped hands. After all, she was now about to realise all those early dreams of hers, in which she had appeared as the damsel-errant who rescued her afflicted family. Her cheque from Messrs Caledon & Gourlay was now due—overdue, in fact, though she had been too busy in these last weeks to give a thought to the matter. How well that they were such dilatory paymasters! If she had had the money earlier, it would all have been frittered

away on unnecessary luxuries; and now she really needed it in earnest—as she had never needed it before, even earlier in the year for Milly. She flew to her desk, and scribbled a hasty note to remind her publishers that they had agreed to pay her in May, and that this was June.

She did not say a word to her mother: the joyful surprise should not be spoilt by any previous hint. But she bore tenderly now with her depression, and was not infected by it in the least: taking so cheerful a view, in fact, of the question of Sir Theodore's allowance, that poor Mrs King lay sadly awake at night, thinking that after all Nella was only a child, and could not appreciate the seriousness of the situation. It was hard, but delightful, to keep the tremendous secret. It sweetened wonderfully the uncongenial tasks of dusting and washing up. It made the hours drag interminably—since two days must pass before the cheque came, in answer to her letter.

When the two days, and two more to boot, had elapsed, Petronella could bear the suspense no longer. She pocketed her pride, and spoke to Sarah.

"Sarah, do your publishers pay you exactly when they promise?"

"On the nail. Why?" asked Sarah abruptly.

"I—only wanted to know," said Petronella, rather faintly.

"But I'm lucky in mine. I told you so before. Some of them are uncommonly tiresome, I've always heard, and it takes a lawyer to make them stump up.—Mind you don't stand any nonsense from Caledon & Gourlay!"

Petronella looked extremely dismayed. Surely, surely she was not going to be made to wait any longer, now when she needed the money so sorely!

"Let's see—you said that they paid in May and November, didn't you?" Sarah's tenacity of memory was occasionally very trying to her friends. "Well, you've already had one payment, then, of course."

Petronella, scarlet, maintained silence. She was not going to give herself away with regard to that humiliating episode.

"Well, of course it's *possible* that there's no more to come," Sarah went on briskly.

"No more to come!" Petronella regarded her with horrified, wide-open eyes.

"You see, the average life of an average novel is about three months."

"About three months!"

It seemed as if Petronella had been metamorphosed, like a mythological nymph, into an echo.

"About that, more or less. Of course, a few more copies may be sold in dribbles; but to all intents and purposes the book's dead. But any-

how," said Sarah, with much crispness, "your people ought to send in their accounts at the proper time, and let you know how you stand. Why, we're well into June! Write at once, and tell them that you fail to understand why you've not heard from them."

"I—I have." Petronella's voice was so faint as to be almost inaudible.

"When?" cried Sarah.

"Four days ago."

"And they haven't had the decency to *answer*? Well, write again, then—quick!—and tell them exactly what you think of them!"

"I don't want to make them angry——"

"*I* should! Don't be absurd, Nella—you don't want to play Sir Walter Raleigh's cloak to Caledon & Gourlay's Queen Elizabeth, do you? You just sit down and write what I tell you."

Petronella, alarmed and hopeful, obeyed. Sarah's epistle was very brief, very business-like, very incisive.

"That ought to fetch them," the dictator observed, reading it over with a grin. "Now stick it up, and I'll post it for you—none of your backing out in a fright, when I'm gone!"

Petronella, with a fluttering heart, surrendered the stern missive; and thereafter, for two days of great length and two interminable nights, she knew neither peace nor happiness. The suggestion that there might be no money to come to her

was too horrible for belief; and yet Sarah possessed experience, insight, and a most judicial mind. It could not—*could* not—be that all that initial labour, all that subsequent anxiety, suspense, and excitement were to go for nothing! On the morning of the second day, Petronella went down at the sound of the postman's knock, so sick with mingled sleeplessness and terror, that she could hardly see the letters for the mist that swam before her eyes. One, two, for her mother. One for herself: a long, stout envelope. She turned it over, and saw the familiar name embossed across the flap. Flying back to her room, she tore it open, with a wildly beating heart. Now, at long last, her suspense was actually to be at an end.

A slip of pink paper—an actual, indubitable cheque—fell out into her hand. She fell on her knees beside the bed, in a tempest of hysterical sobbing and crying: the reaction of joy and relief was almost as painful as the long suspense had been.

CHAPTER XIV

IMPASSE

It was some minutes before Petronella could control herself sufficiently to look at the amount of the cheque: which had, indeed, been so crumpled in her agitated grasp that it required some smoothing out before it could be read.

There was once a young author who wrote short stories of a certain merit; and to his sisters and his cousins and his aunts he boasted himself of the generous payments made by American magazines. "Never a cheque from them, for even the smallest sketch, runs into less than two figures!" said he. Whereat his relations were exceedingly impressed: until one day a brutal male cousin put the heartless and disillusioning question: "Dollars, or cents?"

Now Petronella's cheque from her publishers ran likewise into two figures. To be strictly accurate, it was a cheque for two shillings and ninepence.

It was by no means immediately that she grasped this amazing fact. Few cheques had

come in her way ; and she thought at first that she must have misread this one. The accompanying account, very elaborate, with purple typing and ruled lines of red ink, was confusing in the extreme to her inexperienced eyes. With a painful slowness—for all her desire was to tear out the heart of this horrible revelation as quickly as might be—she learnt that the number of copies printed had been one thousand : that public libraries and town and country reviews had swallowed up a surprising proportion of these : that the sales from February to August (bearing, according to the Agreement, no royalty) amounted to 725 home editions, and 40 colonials : and that her share, twenty per cent. on two copies home edition and three copies colonial, was, as aforesaid, two and ninepence. With pain and difficulty—for arithmetic had always been one of her weakest points—Petronella worked this out for herself, so that there should be no shadow of doubt about it ; and then, clearly understanding at last, she buried her face in her hands and sat still, and wished that she might die. The humiliation, the disappointment and disillusioning, were of an intolerable bitterness. She thought, with a fresh pang, of all that she had planned to do for her mother : of the glorious surprise that now would never be, of the thousand and one luxuries that now would never be bought. She would infinitely rather have received nothing at all ; that would have been comparatively easy

to bear—far easier than being so lifted to the skies and then dashed down to earth again by the hollow mockery of this ridiculous cheque.

“Please, Miss Nella, I’m sorry—but the fish is burnt.”

Petronella got up slowly. At least she had the comfort of knowing that there were no tear-marks on her face—she did not feel that she would ever know the relief of tears again. She went down to the kitchen and wrestled dully with the problem of her mother’s breakfast ; and helped to lay the table, and made some pretence of eating, and responded as well as she could to Mrs King’s conversation. It was hard upon her that this ran almost exclusively on the subject of Sir Theodore’s allowance, and the manner in which they should provide for themselves in the future—assuming that the allowance would come no more. Mrs King was obsessed, as an invalid will be, by the one subject. For the moment it seemed as if she could think and talk of nothing else ; and every sentence was like a dagger in Petronella’s heart. If only she could have responded as she had hoped and expected to do ! If she could have waved her large cheque—a hundred pounds, perhaps—before her mother’s anxious eyes, and seen the anxiety die out of them, and the flushed, worried face breaking into lines of pleasure and relief ! But that was not to be—now, or hereafter.

"I've thought a great deal about it, Nella dear," Mrs King said anxiously, "and it seems to me that it will be best for us to let this house furnished, if we can—as soon as possible."

"Let this house! But where shall we go, then?" Petronella cried, opening her large eyes in astonishment.

"I thought a little—if you didn't disapprove, dear—of taking a post as housekeeper," said Mrs King, faltering a little.

"As *housekeeper*!" Petronella cried, with strong disapprobation in every note of her voice.

"I know it's not the thing for your father's widow," said Mrs King, with a little dignity. "And if his relations had gone on helping us—even a little—I shouldn't have dreamt of vexing them in that way. But, since they seem just to have cast us off, I don't feel that I need consider them. In the old days, when I was a girl at home, I used to look at Mrs Caramel from Kynings in church, and think her the finest lady! Stout, she was, and wore the most beautiful silks, fit to stand alone!" said Mrs King, her actual language becoming reminiscent with her tone. "Of course if you object, Nella, my dear, or Milly or Wilfred either, I'll give up the idea at once, and try to think of something else. But indeed I don't think you need mind. There's many housekeepers that are ladies born; and I never pretended to be that."

"Mother, darling!" said Petronella, with her arm round her neck.

"And indeed," Mrs King pursued, with great earnestness, "there's no reason at all why you should ever need to feel yourself demeaned by me. King is quite a common name; and you may be sure that *I* shouldn't give away that my husband was a King of Kynings. Or, if you liked it better, I could call myself something else altogether——"

Petronella's hand was over her mouth, and Petronella's cheeks were scarlet.

"Mother, dear, *don't* talk like that, as if Milly and I were perfect beasts!" she cried, with tears in her voice. "Don't you *know* that we should love you and be proud of you just the same, wherever you were and whatever you were doing? But I don't want you to have to work at all—it doesn't seem fair——"

"Oh, I don't mind that!" said Mrs King tranquilly. "I've read a good many advertisements in the last few weeks, and I'm sure that I could do it very well and enjoy it; I always was reckoned a good manager. So we'll call it settled, dear, and see about letting the house as soon as I'm quite myself again. If only——"

She paused, looking wistfully at Petronella.

"If only what, mother dear?"

"If only I could see you married and settled first, Nella, I shouldn't have a thing in the world

to be sorry about!" said Mrs King, in a little burst.

"I shall never marry," said Petronella hastily.

"You're so clever, dear; and of course your writing means so much to you," said Mrs King, very humbly and wistfully—echoing past words of Petronella's which sounded hollow enough now. "Of course, don't think for a moment that I don't know it will be the easiest thing in the world for *you* to earn your own living. But I'm old-fashioned, Nella—and I'd rather you had a nice husband to earn it for you!"

Her faith was so sublime that Petronella would not have chilled it for the world, or confessed to the little frightened shiver that ran through her. True, Mrs King had never seen any tangible results at all of all those many hours of daily writing, except a little treat of flowers and fruit when the two short stories appeared in *Marigolds*. But she was perfectly conscious of her own profound ignorance; and Nella, of course, knew best. Perhaps she had been too proud to accept money for her novel. At any rate, now that it was necessary for her to earn her own living, she would of course find it the easiest thing to make as much as she pleased. So Mrs King went away quite happily to draw up an advertisement of the house, and another of her own requirements; and Petronella went away, not happily at all, to sit in her study with a very blank face,

and wonder what she had better do. She had adopted the writing of fiction as her lifework from her childhood. In the past four years, since she left school, she had worked at it definitely and hard, as her chosen profession ; and in that time her gross earnings had been a little over two pounds—while her typewriter alone had cost her over fifteen, and there had been the constant steady drain of stationery and stamps. No ! she could not find the outlook hopeful ; and yet—what else could she possibly do ? She had just proved pretty conclusively that she was perfectly useless in any household capacity. She could not teach—she had always at school shirked all lessons that did not happen to bear on her own particular subject, so that in arithmetic and geography and all the sterner matters she was a thorough ignoramus. Besides, she most decidedly did not *want* to teach. She wanted—oh, how sorely still !—to write.

At this point Sarah happened to come in ; and to her Petronella, very meagrely and partially, unfolded her difficulties. Sarah was so nearly a member of the family, that it was perfectly natural to take her into confidence. It was consolatory to find that she approved without reserve of Mrs King's proposed course of action ; but over the question of Petronella's own doings even she, so full of decision and resource, was at a stand.

"I don't mind *what* I write," said Petronella, talking vaguely of journalism.

"Unfortunately, there are plenty of other people in exactly that same predicament," was Sarah's grim response. "Now, there's type-writing, of course—starvation wages, but worth considering when you're in a hole. Let's see a bit of your work, Nella."

Petronella, who would have scorned the suggestion as most derogatory not so long ago, accepted it now with eagerness; and produced one of her latest short stories. But Sarah shook her head over it with decision.

"Good gracious, Nella, why ever didn't you learn to do it *properly*, when you were about it?" she cried impatiently. "Look here! One, two—five erasures in this half-page: the alignment all wrong here: only one margin, and that much too narrow!"

"But it's quite good enough, surely?" said Petronella, considerably disconcerted. She had been rather proud of the speed with which she had learnt to type.

"Good enough! *Good enough!*" Sarah exclaimed, with an impatient stamp of her foot. "Don't you know that that has been the curse of women's work ever since women first began to work? Yes, it's just good enough to have served your purpose, I suppose—though you'd have had a better chance if it had been better done. But it's not good enough to have the smallest market-value, Nella, and so I tell you frankly."

Petronella advanced faintly a suggestion of secretaryships.

"Secretaryships! We can't all expect to get plums out of our profession!" was Sarah's uncompromising reply. "Besides, what about your typewriting? You'd want that, you know; and shorthand too. A good secretary can't do without those, and any amount of general knowledge as well."

Petronella blushed guiltily, hanging her head. She would have given a great deal, now, for all those neglected opportunities in the school-rooms in St Philip's.

"Then what *can* I do, Sarah?" she said, in a cry of despair.

"Why did you give up writing short stories? You had a couple accepted, didn't you?" said Sarah brusquely.

Petronella gave a forlorn nod. "But I wrote so many that *weren't* accepted—and it seemed so hopeless," she said.

"Well, I shouldn't have said that it was your particular line of writing; because nine-tenths of a short story is plot, and plots aren't your strong point," said Sarah.

Petronella looked up with a flash of indignation. "The reviews all said that the plot was *by far* the best part of *Angela Trevor*," she said.

"So they did; and so it was," said Sarah,

staring at her in a meditative and puzzled way. "Well! I'd have one more shot at it, if I were you. Only—look here, Nella!—suppose you try now to write what the magazines want instead of what *you* want. Potboilers, in short."

"But isn't that—the wrong thing?" faltered Petronella.

"It's the right thing, when you're out to get your living," Sarah returned grimly.

So Petronella laid in a stock of magazines and penny papers, and pored over them until she was heartily sick of them and all their methods. It seemed easy enough to provide what was wanted, if you did not mind steeping yourself in sentiment; and she wrote feverishly a couple of love-stories, that made her blush for their foolishness; and then a couple of short articles on the rearing of babies, compiled shamelessly from Milly's experienced advice; and then a tale of wild adventure and treasure-seeking, such as never was on sea or land—and sent them all off post-haste to the magazines that seemed to prefer such contributions. But it was all most bitter and nauseous to her. No matter, though, if it served to earn her the money that she so sorely needed.

She could not sit still, enduring the slow agony of waiting to hear if they were accepted. She went on writing, feverishly and fast, on the same lines: until sentiment became unen-

durably loathsome to her, and she cast about in desperation for new ground to break. It was at about that time that the Mean Street began to come into its own, as a happy hunting-ground for the jaded novelist; its humours, its tragedies were still in the early days of exploitation, and attracting a good deal of notice. Petronella had read her share of these books, and her anxious mind now reverted to them with a throb of hope. True, she knew nothing whatever about the subject—but then she knew nothing whatever about South America and gold-mining, with both of which topics she had boldly dealt in the last week or so. Besides, the stories of low life had this great advantage, that their materials lay close at hand, to be investigated and studied without difficulty at any moment. Petronella's hopes rose very high indeed. Had not Wilfred told her once that behind the pleasant shopping thoroughfare of Hobson Street there lay rookeries which might vie with the worst slums of the biggest towns? With a pleasurable sense of adventure, and a notebook in her hand, Petronella set out one fine hot August afternoon, and turned down a certain narrow stone passage at which she had often glanced with a faint curiosity; for it appeared to lead nowhere.

It led, with quite a surprising suddenness, into a network of streets and alleys, the very

existence of which she had never suspected. It was a new world to Petronella; and a very unpleasant one too. Her Work had always conveniently excused her from the district-visiting and other parish-work for which she had never had any fancy: so that the shock of novelty was not even broken by previous acquaintance with any of the more respectable mean streets. The sheer ugliness of it all struck her first—no, not first! Her disgusted nose took the earliest opportunity of telling her that she was in an unknown country, and horrible smells seemed to rush at her from every direction—a smell of staleness, a smell of fried fish, a smell of decaying cabbage, and others to which she could put no name, all thickly mixed together in the hot still air: and, above all the rest, an all-pervading smell of dirt. It appeared that no water-carts and no scavengers came here; for dust lay heaped in the road, mingled with all sorts of unclean objects—Petronella did not care to look at them too closely; and little dirty, half-clothed children played with all this, quarrelling with shrill screams. Petronella swallowed her disgust as best she might—after all, she had come of her own free will to collect local colour, and she must not complain of its realism—and stooped to speak to the child nearest her.

“What are you playing at?” said she.

He looked up and spat at her, and then

poured out a flood of language which was as so much heathen Chinese to Petronella; but she knew instinctively that it was vile. He was such a baby, and she was so shocked and frightened, that the tears sprang to her eyes; and two slatternly women, lolling against a doorway, laughed uproariously at her discomfiture. Petronella looked at them in horror, especially at the one with a baby in her arms. She had never before seen anything so dirty, so brutalised, so shamelessly dishevelled of dress.

"Come, missy, what do you want?" said a voice behind her; and she felt a sharp twitch at her skirt. Turning, she faced a girl of about her own age: not conspicuously unclean, not badly dressed, but with an impudent face and brazen eyes that alarmed Petronella more than anything she had seen yet.

"I—I only came to see this place. I've never been here before," she stammered.

"No need to tell us that!" the girl retorted, with a shrill laugh. "That's a pretty little watch of yourn—let's see how it would look on me!" She had the wrist-bracelet off Petronella's arm in a second, and was laughing impudently in her face.

"Here, Bill!" she called to a man who had just slouched into view from the passage. "Here's a pretty young lady come to see us! Ain't that kind, now?"

Now Bill was extremely dirty, and quite

obviously drunk. Petronella shrank and shrank away as he came nearer ; but the dirty children had by this time come gradually up and closed round her in a ragged circle, anticipating better sport than playing in the dust. She could not move in any direction without touching someone whom she did not want to touch ; so she stood still.

"Whash she wantere?" said Bill hoarsely, breathing beer into the already overloaded air. He added a string of sanguinary adjectives ; and then, suddenly catching sight of the notebook in Petronella's hand, he fell into a furious passion. He snatched it from her, and danced unsteadily upon it, shaking his dirty fists in her face ; he consigned all inspectors, and their lady-friends with them, to unspeakable tortures, both here and hereafter. Poor Petronella, quite in the dark as to her supposed offence, gave a little low cry of terror. The women in the doorway rocked to and fro, roaring with amusement. The bold girl laughed shrilly—and then suddenly stopped.

"Here, Bill, that's enough of that now!" said she, giving him a great jerk that was almost too much for his very unstable equilibrium ; and then she vanished with a curious suddenness into a doorway close by. The children also returned hastily to their dusty game. The slatterns in the doorway slipped inside. Bill, staring stupidly, looked all of a sudden as if he too would have

betaken himself elsewhere, if his legs had been a little more trustworthy. And Petronella, turning with a white face and terrified eyes, cried out : "Oh, Mr Vecqueray !"

"Sorry, sir. Didn't know the young lady were a friend of yours," muttered Bill ; and shambled heavily off, discomfited.

"Oh, please, please take me out of this dreadful place !" sobbed Petronella, clinging to his arm ; for indeed she was shaking so, with the fright and the reaction, that she could scarcely stand.

"What in the world brought you here ?" said Vecqueray sternly.

Petronella stammered out a feeble explanation. It sounded very feeble indeed, now, to her own chagrined ears.

"You are never to come here again—under any pretence whatever."

"Oh, no ! Oh, I never will !" Petronella promised, sobbing : not resenting in the least that tone of severe authority.

"You might have been murdered—robbed, at any rate. *Have* you lost anything ?"

"Only my watch," Petronella made shamefaced confession ; and then, putting her hand into her pocket, discovered that that had been picked of purse and handkerchief. "But it doesn't matter—oh, *please* don't go back about it !" she implored frantically.

"I'm not going back—now," he replied.

So Petronella returned home, very sorely beshent by her afternoon's experience. And, as if that humiliation were not enough for one day, by the evening post there returned to her four out of the five new manuscripts which she had sent out into the world with such high and anxious hopes.

CHAPTER XV

BINKIE

THERE came to Petronella, in her Valley of Humiliation, perhaps the worst temptation that can assail the writer who is being gradually beaten down to the ranks of the failures. It came in the guise of a little library book, in a cover of demure Quaker grey. That took Petronella's fancy, and so did the fact that the book, though only a few months old, was already in its fourth edition. So, though she knew neither the name nor the author by repute, she brought it home, and sat down to read it. And at first she was struck by the marvellously bad English and awkward phrasing, and wondered in her guileless soul why such a piece of work should ever have achieved even publication. And then she was puzzled, not understanding what she read ; and then all of a sudden she understood a great deal too well, and blushed crimson, and shut up the book in a hurry, as if it had burned her. Strong indignation seized her that such a book should stand at ease on a library shelf at all ; and then she told herself that

it really could not have meant what she imagined—she would look on to the end, for her own satisfaction. And, having looked at the end, she saw that it had meant all that, and a great deal more besides. She took it back to the library forthwith, and said exactly what she thought to the girl in charge.

"Well, miss, there's been a great *demand* for it," said that young woman, all injured innocence.

"Then there shouldn't be any supply!" fulminated Petronella.

"Why, we *must* have what's asked for!" said the girl, opening her eyes in astonishment. "I haven't read that one myself; but I'm told it is a bit strong."

"*Strong!* It's *disgusting!*" said Petronella.

"Well, hers always are a bit on that side," the girl admitted. "But there's always a great run on them, I assure you, miss; and on all others of the same sort."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Please don't send *me* any more of the kind," said Petronella; and so went home, with her virtuous head in the air.

She had been too much vexed and excited to remember that she wanted another book in exchange; and had already taken off her hat before she realised that she was left with nothing to read. To soothe her ruffled feelings, she fetched her own *Angela Trevor* from its place of honour in the drawing-room, and sat down to

glance through it : always a pleasant occupation. For the gods themselves cannot take back their gifts ; and for all time one book, at least, would stand inalienably to her credit.

Perhaps the last book which she had had in her hands had tinged her ideas a little, even in that brief acquaintance with it. Certainly *Angela* read a little dull. The plot was certainly excellent—there could be no two opinions about that, in spite of Sarah's opprobrious dictum ; but the general effect was a little milk-and-watery. The villain was so very mild compared with that Gaspard Delaval who had just retired to the library in disgrace. The heroine was so very good. Petronella had had doubts as to her excessive virtue, even when writing the book, and more than one review had held it up to scorn. Beyond a little gentle burglary—Petronella had been painfully conscious that she was writing in the air about that, and the result was certainly not a great success, even in her own eyes—there was not a single commandment broken in the book. If people were wont to prefer the "strong" type of fiction, it was quite easy to understand why *Angela Trevor* had remained modestly within the limits of one edition, and why *Adelaide's Fortune* had never achieved publication at all.

Humanity is prone to defend the poor things that are its own ; and *Angela Trevor* had meant so very much to Petronella, that she was fain to clutch

at any shreds and vestiges of excuse that presented themselves. There was, unfortunately, no Sarah at hand to remark pungently on the many successful novels that had run into thousands, and yet were perfectly clean and wholesome. It seemed to Petronella, sitting staring at one book and thinking of the other, that she had at last arrived at the real reason of her failures. There was not enough "strength" in her work. And that, surely, was a defect that could be easily remedied.

But she could not write a story like that which she had just returned in righteous indignation to the library! Her cheeks burned at the very idea; and even if she had wished to do such a thing, her innocent experiences were quite inadequate. But she was not entirely ignorant—no girl who even superficially skims the papers can be—of certain vague details of the seamy side of life; though hitherto they had had no interest for her, and she had merely turned away from them in distaste. Still, if such knowledge were desirable in a successful writer of fiction, nothing could be easier than to read the annals of the Divorce Court with attention; and a mere baby at the game could certainly invent some variant on the age-old theme of a Man and a Woman and a Tertium Quid. Petronella quailed a moment, thinking of her mother, who made a point of avoiding such books. But, after all, it was mainly

for her : to get money for her greater ease and comfort. And perhaps it would avoid all difficulties if the book were published under a pseudonym. By which last thought, if she had but realised it, Petronella acknowledged conscious guilt.

She turned to her desk in a hurry, anxious to begin : perhaps anxious not to sit debating the matter too long, lest her resolution should falter. It had occurred to her that the unfortunate *Adelaide's Fortune* might be remodelled on an entirely new plan, with this exotic *motif* ; and in that case she would certainly be saved a great deal of time and trouble. She dashed hastily into a *réchauffé* of the first chapter, referring to the scribbled rough copy which fortunately had not been destroyed. Really, there were quite admirable openings in that guileless narrative for—the sort of interpolations she had in her mind. She had certainly not expected to find her task so easy. For the first time in her life, hearing her mother's voice outside the door, she started and flushed, and hurriedly drew the blotting-paper over what she had written. It was an entirely new and most unpleasant sensation.

She began to study the seamy side of the newspapers ; persevering, though it gave her a feeling of mental uncleanness that was highly disagreeable. Such portions as seemed to her appropriate, she lifted almost bodily, and embedded undigested in

her book ; and the result would have made angels weep, and unregenerate men laugh—though perhaps not very merrily. For Petronella was a very clean-minded girl, who had preserved in many things an almost childlike innocence ; and her new work was to her like writing in an ugly foreign tongue. The poor pale little novel was invested with hideous and lurid absurdities, until it looked like a very small child decked out in mock jewellery and stage tinsel. The characters became those of a nightmare ; their actions would have seemed unreasonable in a madhouse. And still poor Petronella toiled on, loathing her task, and yet clinging frantically to it : it was the one last means by which she might hope to retain her footing in the world of writers.

By this time Milly was quite strong again and about as usual ; very pretty, very much delighted with her new baby, charmed to take up all her usual occupations once more. Busy as she was, she made time constantly to come in and help Mrs King ; who had not even yet gained back anything like her usual strength. Milly would bring in her babies—one on each arm, and little Binkie clinging to her skirt,—deposit them, laughing, in the little long garden under Grandmamma's wing, and go indoors to busy herself with Bertha and the housework ; and by this means Petronella was set free to devote most of her time to writing ; and all parties were well pleased.

One day, coming out for a brief rest, with aching head and clouded eyes—this distasteful work seemed to tire her more than any writing had ever done before,—she found her mother and sister in deep consultation, and Milly's bright face a little downcast.

"You never get a holiday!" Mrs King was urging. "It would do you good, Milly."

"Well, I should have loved to go," Milly owned, "and I would have gone, if Bella Curtis (who looked after the children while I was laid up, you know) could have come in to sleep. But she has gone away to her first place; and I know no one else that I should care to trust."

"Can't you trust *me*?" cried Mrs King in mock wrath.

"I won't have *you*," Milly returned, with her pretty kind smile. "I know you too well! You'd be in and out of bed all night, thinking you heard one or other of them, and you'd catch a fresh chill, and we should have you ill again on our hands. Wilfred says you mustn't think of it."

"What's the matter?" asked Petronella.

The matter was unfolded. Wilfred and Milly and the new baby were invited to go for a couple of days to an old friend of his, who was staying in the neighbourhood for a short time. They would only be away one night; but Milly could not bear the thought of leaving Binkie and Mungo

to the tender mercies of a little young servant, who was a notoriously heavy sleeper.

"Of course, you must go," said Petronella, graciously. "I'll go and sleep with the children—if that will do."

"Oh, Nella!" Milly was almost overwhelmed by the magnitude of the offer. "I never thought of worrying *you*. Would you really not mind?"

"Of course not," said Petronella. "You know the children get on all right with me; and I'll promise to hear the very least sound they make at night, and watch over them like a dragon!"

So the matter was settled, though Milly still suffered from qualms lest she were taking undue advantage of the family genius: as one might feel a delicacy in letting a royal guest offer to help in washing up tea-things. There are probably people who would not take any stock at all in a holiday that consisted of one night away from home, accompanied by a six-weeks' baby; but to stay-at-home Milly it was a tremendous joy and excitement, involving endless preparations and countless exhortations to those left behind at home. Finally, all arrangements were completed, and the adventurers set off in—crowning bliss! a motor which had been sent to fetch them: still a sufficient rarity to attract a great deal of attention at that time. Milly's beaming face was pretty to see, as she got in with her placid baby in her arms—Christabel Marguerite; to be afflicted all her

future life with the inexcusable nickname of Kissie. Wilfred, following, gave her hand a little grip, and Milly responded with a happy glance of confidence and pleasure, intended for no other person to see. But Petronella, standing at the gate, did see, and it gave her a curious little unreasonable chill : a dim sense that Milly, for all her household worries and hard work, was a person to be envied. The revised version of *Adelaide's Fortune* seemed more than ever disagreeable, as she went slowly indoors and sat down to work at it.

No one had expected her to be burdened with the children during the day-time. It was fortunately a fine day, and they played quite happily in the garden of Clematis Cottage all the morning, and subsequently, having dined as good as gold under grandmotherly supervision, retired to bed, smiling and cheerful. In the afternoon Sarah came in and played with them—an adorable companion, full of startling ideas, and not objecting to play the most undignified rôles. Petronella, writing grimly, heard the joyous shouts of the little ones and Mrs King's laughter ; distinguishing that Sarah was by turns a Red Indian, a plum-pudding, a crocodile, a Shetland pony, a sausage, and a pig. When the fun threatened to become uproarious, she heard a warning "Hush ! You'll disturb Auntie Nella !" and then the steady murmur of Sarah's harsh voice telling fairy-tales. And so, in due course, they retired merrily to

bed ; and after supper, Petronella took her night-gear and her blotter and her fountain-pen, kissed her mother good-night, and repaired next door. It was surprising how little reluctance she felt in taking up the part of night-nurse. Her present writing was so little of a joy to her that more than once during the afternoon she had been minded to go out and join the merry party in the garden. But pride forbade. She had never done such a thing in her life ; everyone would look up astonished, and wonder what had made her come.

It was not bedtime, and she was by no means sleepy, and she had always found that her thoughts flowed best at night—even if the result should be sleeplessness for an hour or two. She went up to her room and sat by the open window, writing steadily ; and though her pen ran on with an agreeable fluency, she found herself disliking her theme more and more. Against her will she kept recalling the look that had passed between Milly and her husband as they drove off that morning. That was surely a little bit of reality, clean, wholesome, and pleasant : all this that she was forcing herself to describe was nothing but an ugly fable. How extraordinary that the great bulk of novel-readers should prefer it !

For all this, there was a certain sense of satisfaction in covering the pages so quickly. Ideas came almost faster than she could put them into writing. Her unwholesome puppets woke to a

sort of galvanised life, and jerked out their decadent sentences with quite a colourable likeness to reality. Petronella's cheeks burned, and she wrote very fast. At this rate her detested task might be finished before the end of the summer ; for she devoted afternoons as well as mornings to it now, and often a goodly portion of the evening as well. What a good thing that she had undertaken this office for Milly ! Her mother would not know or be worried if she sat up writing half the night—at any rate, she had no idea of stirring from where she sat for hours to come.

“O—o—oh—h ! O—o—oh—h !”

Petronella, absorbed, wrote on with deaf ears.

“A—a—h ! A—a—ah—ee—eee—eeee !”

“There's a child crying somewhere,” said Petronella's subconscious self. “What a shame that they don't see to it !” She went on writing faster, with a vexed frown. The screams were really most disturbing.

“E—ee—eee—eeee—EEEEEE ! !”

Petronella started up in a flurry, wide awake all of a sudden to her responsibilities, and flew into the next room. How much original sin there is about a match when one tries to strike a light in a hurry ! She broke three before she succeeded in lighting the gas, and could see Binkie sitting up in bed bathed in tears.

“Darling, what's the matter ?” cried Petronella, in terror. She ran to the cot-side, and

wrestled madly with the net which was fastened over the top of it. Where could the fastenings be? And how in the world could Binkie, securely netted in like a little calf in a cart, have injured herself sufficiently to account for those piercing shrieks? Petronella had the net off now, and was examining the sufferer with trembling hands; but no exterior wound was visible.

"Binkie, darling, don't! Tell auntie—where does it hurt you?"

Binkie sobbed out a mournful tale that conveyed nothing to Petronella's anxious but uninitiated ears.

"Oh, Binkie, auntie *can't* understand!" she cried in despair. "Do try to stop crying for one minute, and tell me!"

Binkie's voice had dropped about two octaves from its original note, but she was still howling very grievously. She controlled herself, however, enough to wail out, with an awful gulp:

"I—loht—my—poonder!"

Petronella was very much exasperated. "Is *that* all the reason for this frightful noise?" she exclaimed; and Binkie, discerning the justifiable wrath in her voice, took a deep breath and began to howl afresh. At the same moment there came a faint sound of scuffling and a little threatening murmur from the cot at the other side of the room.

"Binkie, be quiet, this *instant*!" exclaimed the distracted Petronella. "You'll wake Mungo!"

Binkie howled on, regardless.

"If you stop *at once*, I'll look for your poonder. If you don't, I'll—I'll smack you," stormed Petronella.

Binkie paused to examine that proposition. "A hard thmack?" she inquired, in a voice choked with tears.

"A *very* hard smack!" declared Petronella, with the emphasis born of desperation.

Binkie rubbed both hands backwards over her tear-stained face, and gulped several times.

"I've thtopped," she observed; and Petronella dived down on hands and knees under the cot—for she was sufficiently well acquainted with Binkie's language to know that a poonder was a hair-ribbon; and sufficiently well acquainted with Binkie's habits to know that there would be no peace for anyone until the said poonder was found. And as she grovelled, she was very angry indeed. To be stopped, in the full flood of literary inspiration, for a bit of ridiculous nonsense like this! It was more than exasperating; it would probably be a case of never recapturing that first fine careless rapture. She felt, in her degree, what Coleridge must have felt when he was so fatally interrupted—as every schoolboy knows—in the midst of *Kubla Khan*.

"There, Binkie—there's your poonder," she said very grimly, emerging from her retirement. "Now I'll tie up your hair, and you must lie

down and go to sleep at once, like a good girl."

But at that Binkie's lower lip began to quiver and turn outwards in an ominous manner.

"For goodness' sake, don't wake Mungo *now*!" Petronella exclaimed, paying a flying visit to the other cot: where her nephew, for some inscrutable reason, had elected to sleep throughout the turmoil. "What *is* the matter with you, Binkie?"

"I got a pain," sobbed Binkie.

"*Where*?" demanded Petronella.

"In my body," the afflicted one replied, with tears.

Now Petronella had dark suspicions that she was being, in the vulgar phrase, had: that Milly would have quelled this rising long ago without the smallest difficulty: and that Binkie had richly earned the threatened smack. Besides, she knew perfectly well the admirable educational theory that a threat should inevitably be followed by fulfilment. On the other hand, if Binkie screamed any more, it was hardly credible that Mungo would not speedily be adding his voice to the chorus. Also, it would be an act of the extremest cruelty to punish a child who was not well; and she was quite without means of judging the genuineness of the sudden pain. So for a brief moment she faltered: and that moment sealed her fate; for the intuition of your very small

child, even when apparently drowned in grief, is quite deadly.

Binkie looked up, and smiled an angelic, watery smile through her tears. "*Dear auntie!*" she observed, in a voice like the cooing of a dove. "Want to thit on your lap!"

"Well, just for five minutes—and then back you go to bed!" said Petronella sternly. But she was lost, and she knew it.

Binkie scrambled up hastily in her cot, and held out engaging arms; and Petronella lifted her out with some exertion.

"I heavy!" said Binkie, beaming; and so she undoubtedly was, being of the fat, fair, and (counting in months) forty type.

"Very heavy. Now go to sleep," said Petronella, preserving a stern manner with some difficulty, and wrapping the evil-doer in a blanket.

Binkie snuggled down with an adorable meekness; well she knew that under the authority of Auntie Milly or Grandmamma this breach of rules would never be permitted for an instant!

"Auntie thing?" she suggested, in a more dove-like voice than ever.

"If you will shut your eyes *tight*," Petronella bargained.

Binkie shut them with instantaneous obedience; and her victim began a low, crooning song, such as would not be likely to disturb Mungo, congratulating herself the while upon her astuteness.

Such a sleepy tune must surely achieve its end in the shortest possible space of time ; and really Binkie—though she had been extremely naughty—was a dear little soul. Petronella held her a little closer, and sang on, with her eyes on the clock. Ten minutes of this steady crooning would surely be enough ; the long baby eyelashes never moved——

Petronella slowed down with caution, and stopped ; and in an instant wide blue eyes were beaming up at her, untroubled by a vestige of sleep.

“*Dear auntie !*” said a honeyed voice of love and guile.

Petronella hardened her heart.

“Binkie, you must go to *sleep*,” she said with decision. “Now—at once !”

“Auntie thing ?”

“Yes. But you are not to stay awake another minute.”

Again Binkie lay supine, a fat and reposeful cherub ; and again Petronella sang. This time, she resolved, she would not leave off too hastily. After all, though she could not write, she could go on planning out her story quite usefully. But, oddly, it would not come at all. Presumably, she was herself growing sleepy. She found herself thinking, quite unintentionally, of the length of Binkie’s eyelashes, and the prettiness of her little fat hands. She wondered how hard it had been

for Binkie's mother to die and leave her baby behind. She found the tears rushing suddenly and uncontrollably to her eyes.

"Pitty auntie!" murmured Binkie; and turned, really sleepy at last, towards Petronella, holding a bit of her sleeve in her warm small fingers.

She had been a little scamp—but, after all, she was sweet. Petronella held her very close, rocking gently to and fro, for she could not sing another note for the lump in her throat. She bent over and kissed the soft dimpled cheek—a most foolish and rash proceeding, under the circumstances.

"*Muvver!*" murmured Binkie, two-thirds asleep; and Petronella gave a great sob.

She raised her bent head suddenly—it might have been a minute later, or it might not—with a sudden instinct that she was not alone; and saw Sarah standing in the doorway looking at her.

"Hush!" Petronella whispered, holding up a warning hand.

"She's sound asleep," said Sarah. "Why don't you put her into her cot?"

Petronella rose, carefully, slowly, reluctantly. The rosy bundle in her arms stirred and murmured, and then subsided peacefully on to its pillow; and all the time Sarah stood watching, as if she saw something that she had never seen before. She did not offer to help in any way; and Petronella was glad—she wanted to do it all herself.

"How did you get in?" she asked suddenly.

"Drawing-room window. You didn't go round the house very carefully, Nella!" said Sarah, with a grin. "I heard that young woman shouting some time ago, but I couldn't get away then; I came as soon as I could, to lend a hand."

"Thank you," said Petronella.

"For nothing, eh?" said Sarah. "Well, good-night! I'll see to all the bolts and things, and put down the latch of the front-door as I go out."

Petronella went slowly back to her own room. She was as wide-awake as she had ever been in her life, though it was considerably past midnight. Going to bed at present would obviously be a waste of time; and she might yet get in another hour or two of writing—only she had quite forgotten the point at which she had stopped. She must read over the last page or two——

As she read, a slow, painful crimson flushed up to the roots of her hair. Coming straight from the sleeping babies to this—worse than rubbish—was like stepping from a wholesome and happy nursery, filled with air and sunlight, into a heavily-scented boudoir, hot and stifling. Loathing her task, she had written always as fast as possible, never stopping to read over the chapters as she finished them; she had certainly never realised that they would read like this. For a moment she paused, looking blankly about her with eyes wide with horror and disgust; then, with hands that shook and yet were firm, she tore the whole

manuscript across and across—not in any hysterical gust of passion, for she knew well enough that she was deliberately breaking the last links that held her to the life literary.

She tip-toed softly into the next room again. Mungo slept like a pattern baby, and Binkie like a happy angel who had never known sin. Petronella knelt down and said her prayers beside the cot, with perhaps the bitterest tears that she had ever shed ; and then went to bed, and slept a very peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER XVI

AN OPEN LETTER

PETRONELLA went very humbly to her mother the next day, and asked to be taught how to cook and how to sew : to Mrs King's joy—for she hoped that this astounding novelty portended matrimony—but also somewhat to her alarm.

"You get so little fresh air as it is—you're over your writing all day long," she said anxiously. "You oughtn't to give up all sorts of exercise, dear. Why, you never seem to play tennis at all now! Are you sure that you can spare the time?"

"Oh, yes, I can spare the time quite well," Petronella answered very quietly. "And I don't mean to stay indoors any more as I've been doing lately."

Relieved of that anxiety, Mrs King was only too delighted to teach a new pupil—albeit a pupil to whom these new lessons proved hard indeed. Petronella was old to begin what Milly had learnt before she was ten years old. She had no natural

aptitude. Many of her new tasks were highly repugnant to her—she hated sticking her fingers with dough ; she detested a sewing-machine only less than a needle ; she loathed a duster only less than a dish-cloth. But, whatever her natural deficiencies, she had at least grit and perseverance. She meant to learn, and she learnt—very slowly, with a stupidity quite astonishing in a girl who was considered clever ; but still a certain amount of progress was slowly, painfully made. The initial stages were all alike abhorrent to her, without relief ; but there came a time when she began to discern, dimly and afar off, that a well-baked cake really was a cause for legitimate pride, and that, though sewing was a weariness and detestable, one felt an immense satisfaction in wearing a blouse made by one's own hands from start to finish. She learnt at first by rote, as a child dismally learns its alphabet. But presently she began to understand that the household world is ruled by laws that are interesting and comprehensible, if you care to study them : that there is reason in the breaking of eggs, and a definite reason, also, why you must not bang the oven door upon your sponge-cake baking inside. She found out by painful experience that one does not cut out two precisely similar sleeves for the same garment ; she grasped the difference in appearance between a chicken and an ancient rooster, and became well-instructed in the meaning of that

horribly dead thing, the eye of a fish. When she cut out and made a little frock for Binkie and presented it to the amazed Milly, she felt a glow of satisfaction that she had never again thought to experience in this vale of tears. And Mrs King, besides the joy of initiating her favourite daughter into her own favourite pursuits, was undeniably glad of help in the work of the household. She regained her strength very slowly indeed—perhaps as a result of the months of overwork that had preceded her illness. It seemed a fortunate thing that as yet no claimant had appeared for the lease of the furnished house; and therefore for the moment Mrs King's own search for a post as housekeeper was in abeyance. She talked about it a good deal to Petronella, as they sat working together. Her requirements were so very simple, that they surely ought to prove easy of satisfaction, when the time came. The only stipulation on which she insisted was that she would only go to some place quite in the country.

"But won't you find it inconvenient, after living so long close to shops and all that sort of thing?" said town-bred Petronella, a little surprised: but not half so much surprised as by her mother's reply.

"I hate shops. I hate a town!" said Mrs King, with promptness and fervour.

"Mother! I thought you were so fond of

this place!" cried Petronella, her large eyes very wide open.

Mrs King made a short pause.

"Your father took a fancy to it, Nella: and what pleased him was good enough for me."

"But—after he died?"

"Then there was your education and Milly's—and St Philip's so close, and just the right place for you."

"But when we left school—what hindered you from moving then?"

"Do you think I'd take you away from all your friends, and bury you in the country, just because I'd have liked it myself? Why, how would Milly have ever met Wilfred?" said Mrs King, with much simplicity.

Petronella went on stitching, with very great care.

"I liked to fancy sometimes, when you were both married, that perhaps I could have a little farm in the country—not big enough to call a real farm, but a cow or two, and pigs—I always did have a fancy for pigs—and chickens and bees and ducks. And I could have made it pay, too—I'm sure I could!" said Mrs King, with her head up, and a business-like light in her eyes. "A real garden I'd have had, too—not a town strip, with people overlooking you every side. And you and Milly would have brought your babies for a holiday often; and they'd have run wild, as

young things ought, and learnt more things in a day than town-children learn in a year.—It always went very hard with me, Nella, that you and Milly should be brought up town-children: though here, to be sure, you can get to the Downs and the open country fast enough, and that's better than nothing."

Mrs King had left off working in her enthusiasm, and sat looking with bright, unseeing eyes out of the window, a flush on her comely face. It faded quite suddenly, and she stooped for her fallen needle.

"But that, of course, was while I supposed your grandfather's allowance would go on as he promised," she said, in a flat voice.

"But, mother"—Petronella's lips were trembling—"you have some money saved; you said so. Isn't there enough to start you in such a farm?"

"It's too great a risk, Nella—now that there's nothing to fall back upon. It mightn't answer, after all; farming doesn't seem to be what it was in my young days, from all I hear.—Oh, no! I gave up that fancy altogether—it was only a fancy at the best, you know—when your grandfather's allowance stopped."

"Mother, you've always given up everything, it seems to me——"

"Nella, you're talking nonsense; and I'm getting old—for I don't seem able to see my work any longer!" said Mrs King, folding up

her sewing very quickly with hands that trembled. "And I've just remembered there's that Smithers woman coming this evening, and I promised to see the Rector about her, and get her a milk-ticket. I shall just have time to run round to the Rectory before tea!"

"But it's raining fast," said Petronella. "Indeed, you mustn't dream of going out in this!"

"Oh, Nella, I must—it won't hurt me. I can't go on coddling for ever!"

"You know what Wilfred said——"

"But I can't let Mrs Smithers come all this way for nothing——"

"I'll take a note," said Petronella. "Won't that do?"

"It's so wet, Nella!"

"If it wasn't too wet for you, it isn't too wet for me," smiled Petronella; and went to put her hat on.

It was a singularly unpleasant day: not only wet, but warm and windy as well, a very disagreeable combination. Petronella walked rather sadly along the road, slanting her umbrella against the gusts that tried to snatch it from her. She missed her writing intolerably; the want of it was a continually recurring ache, like the loss of some physical sense. Try as she might to fill the empty days—and she did try her very best, with housework and sewing, and steady, conscientious practising of scales and exercises,—they still felt

dull, and long, and unbearably hollow. There was no motive in them ; nothing to look forward to. Day by day, her opinion of herself had grown humbler ; and her eyes, no longer confining their vision to the creatures of her imagination, saw unsuspected merits in the living people around her. She had never loved her mother half so dearly as in these last weeks, or known that there was half so much in her to admire. Dearly as she had always loved Milly, she had never understood till now how much strong good sense and natural shrewdness lay under that mild and gentle exterior. As for herself—what use was she to anyone ? In what possible way, now that it came to the point, could she hope to earn even the humblest means of livelihood ? Something that was not a raindrop splashed down on Petronella's burning cheek. Milly, with eager and loving entreaties, had begged her to come and make her home with them, such time as Clematis Cottage should be let ; and Wilfred had seconded the proposition with scarcely less warmth. Well ! she might at least, now that she had learnt the use of her hands, save them the expense of a servant altogether, for a time ; but such an arrangement could not possibly last ; with a strange new insight, Petronella knew that married people like their house to themselves. The outlook was grey and dull indeed, and very hopeless—like a riddle with no answer. She wiped her face hastily

with her handkerchief—surprising how wet it was, in spite of her umbrella,—and rang the Rectory bell.

“Will you give this to the Rector, please? I’ll wait for an answer.”

It was a new servant who opened the door. She replied that the Rector was in; and showed Petronella into his study to wait.

She had never been in that room before, since the time of the old Rector. She saw it, like the drawing-room, amazingly changed, rather bare, filled and lined with books; but at least here there were evidences of occupation; no doubt that this was a well-used room, and a bachelor’s room. Petronella looked slowly round, taking in details. There were pipes everywhere—in a rack on the wall, lying on table and mantelpiece, an old-fashioned long churchwarden standing upright in a corner by the fireplace. Tobacco pouches and jars there were also, and matches—used and unused—in every direction. There was a great kneehole-table drawn up close to the window, covered with papers and books in a decent, but not punctilious, order. There were two or three Arundel prints on the walls, and a large framed photograph of a tabby cat hung in a post of honour over the mantelpiece. A brindled bull-dog lay on a rug, snoring profoundly; and hard by, in complete amity, two black kittens reposed in a mixed heap in a basket. Because for some unex-

plained reason the room hurt her, Petronella looked out of the wide window to the garden, which was very large and old and charming—not without its charm even on this unpromising day of driving rain. For some other unexplained reason, that hurt her too. So she turned her eyes indoors again, and sat with them fixed on the bull-dog—surely as unsentimental an object as might well be : there was no conceivable reason why he should have appeared to her all blurred, through a rainbow mist.—This would never do ! She took herself to task, facing the situation boldly, and gripping her courage in both hands. She had refused Mr Vecqueray of her own free will and deliberately—how long ago it seemed since that day in the hyacinth wood ! It was quite useless to be sorry now—if she was sorry. This absurd weakness was of course due to seeing at close quarters, in her prospectively homeless condition, this rather desirable home that might have been hers. She was heartily sorry that she had ever come on this errand for her mother, and heartily ashamed of herself for being so foolish. How more than humiliating if the Rector should come in and find her—well, with this absurdly blurred vision ! She was half-minded to run away there and then ; and yet she had an odd desire to see him, that kept her sitting where she was, staring at the bull-dog for dear life. She had not seen him—which does not mean the bull-

dog—to speak to for some time. He had presumably no idea that they were going away, and that Clematis Cottage was to be let to strangers. Would he mind at all when he did know? Petronella's heart began to beat ridiculously fast; she was more than ever anxious to go, more than ever longing to stay. Why did a stray sentence of Sarah's come floating into her mind at that moment, making her feel as if a cold hand had gripped her heart? "Captain Vincent would never have proposed to Angela again, when she had once refused him.—He couldn't; he wasn't that sort of man." Well! that referred to the hero of her book—not, of course, to Mr Vecqueray in any possible way. There was not the remotest reason why the recollection should make her all of a sudden so desperately unhappy—so miserable that she could not sit still for another moment.

She started up and went towards the window. She would count the roses on the trees, the rain-drops running down the panes—anything to keep her mind busy, and fight down that dreadful, humiliating lump that was rising in her throat. And, as she moved, a sudden gust blew in at the open window, scattering the Rector's papers, and sending one fluttering, to fall at her feet. Petronella's eyes instinctively followed its flight, and could not withdraw themselves instantly as it settled. Vecqueray's handwriting was extraordin-

arily clear and distinct. The first line of the letter—it was obviously a letter—burned themselves upon her brain before she knew that she had read them.

“My dearest Sarah——”

With a little gasp, Petronella snatched up the sheet of paper, put it back in its place on the desk, and fled back to her seat. She was cold and shivering, though it was such a warm day. There were no tears in her eyes now; the lump in her throat was quite gone. She felt only a dreadful numbing chill, that seemed to freeze her, body and soul. Only her mind was clear and worked fast—faster than it had ever done in her life before. Things that had occurred in her presence without her notice came back to her now in a flood of dazzling, illuminating light. She saw vividly, as if it had been yesterday, Sarah waiting for her in her little study, when she came back from the hyacinth wood; she heard the stifled passion in her voice, recalled every word of her inexplicable outburst. It was all as clear as daylight now. She knew—what she had never dreamed of for a moment before—that Sarah had loved Vecqueray with all the strength of her strong nature, for longer than it was possible to guess; perhaps ever since she first met him. And now, her long fidelity rewarded, they were engaged; she had taken the place which Petronella in her wilful blindness

had refused to fill. Or—was this letter only the beginning of the engagement?

“Miss King! I had no idea that it was you who had come with your mother’s note! Please forgive me for keeping you so long—and for the stupidity of my new housemaid, who showed you into this untidy room.”

He was obviously annoyed and perturbed—absurdly so, if the slight alleged reason had been all. But Petronella saw his quick glance go like an arrow to the papers on the desk.

She found herself on her feet, and heard herself saying, in a voice not noticeably unnatural, that it did not matter; she was in no hurry.

“Here is the ticket that Mrs King wanted.—But you can’t go home through this downpour. You must wait till it has stopped a little.”

“I have a cloak—I am not afraid of rain,” said Petronella, hastily and a little faintly. She was, in fact, afraid of nothing but herself; she wanted nothing but to get home again as fast as possible.—She suddenly knew herself to be a fearful coward, and raised her eyes, and looked him bravely in the face. She could not go, leaving him to suppose that she did not know. She would have to confess her knowledge sooner or later; let it be sooner, while she was still stunned by the shock of it.

“Mr Vecqueray—I ought to tell you——”

He turned, quickly attentive.

"The wind blew one of your papers off your desk—I am sorry," Petronella stumbled miserably on. She could not be blind to the sudden change in his face. "I—I could not help seeing the first line——"

Her faltering words trailed away into a dreadful silence.

"I—I——"

In bitter shame of herself, Petronella suddenly called up all her flagging courage, and spoke out with a clear and gentle bravery.

"I want to give you my very heartiest congratulations, Mr Vecqueray. You must forgive me for finding out, by mistake, while it was still a secret. Sarah has always been my greatest friend—after my sister—and no one knows better than I do how true and loyal and splendid she is.—You are very much to be congratulated ; and you will go on finding that out for yourself more and more as long as you live !"

She stopped abruptly. It was done—well done ; she had no reason to be ashamed of herself any more. And—perhaps discretion was the better part of valour.

In her struggle for self-mastery, she had had no attention to spare for the manner in which he received her congratulations : or perhaps his extreme discomposure would have struck her as unusual. The very odd voice in which he answered certainly did attract her attention.

"Miss King, I—I really don't quite understand——"

Petronella blushed scarlet. He was offended that she had made the discovery. Well, she could not help that—she could have done no more than apologise for what was, after all, no fault of hers.

"I only saw the first line," she murmured. "But, of course, that told me—I could not be mistaken——"

He snatched the tell-tale sheet from his desk, and stared at it. He, too, was singularly red.

"It told you——"

"Of your engagement to Sarah Garnett, of course," said Petronella, with dignity. She was not going to apologise any more.

"But—forgive me—you really are mistaken, after all." His voice was stranger than ever. "I am—not engaged to Miss Garnett. There has never been any idea of such an engagement."

Petronella was terribly embarrassed. How foolish she had been, to jump in that way to conclusions! It was a merciful thing that she had not involved Sarah herself in anything that she had said—poor Sarah: for whom, in the midst of her confusion, she had time to spare a pang of pity.

"I—oh, I am so sorry to have been so foolish!" she murmured. "Miss Garnett happens to be the only Sarah that I know—I never

stopped to think that there are of course plenty of others——”

“Of course,” he agreed; and quite suddenly his embarrassment was gone—his voice even sounded amused. “But—curiously enough—Miss Garnett happens also to be the only Sarah that *I* know!”

Petronella stared at him. Was he mad? or were her ears playing her false?

He touched the paper in his hand.

“You took this for the beginning of a love-letter. And so it is. But the Sarah to whom it was written lived a couple of hundred years ago. Her name was Sarah Jennings; and she was afterwards Marlborough’s duchess, and Queen Anne’s Mrs Freeman.”

Petronella’s eyes were naturally very large. They were distended now to a size that was quite abnormal.

“Please don’t think I am laughing at you.” His voice dropped suddenly to a very gentle note. “Don’t you understand? This is only an odd page of my new book, that I happened to have left about when I was called away in a hurry. I am usually more careful.”

“Your—new—book?” Petronella panted out the words in little gasps. “But—do *you* write books?”

He coloured deeply again, and laughed with much embarrassment.

"I do—but *you* are the first person to whom I have confessed as much. And that is as it should be."

Petronella stared in dumb bewilderment.

"I have always written under a pseudonym—even my publishers are not sure of my identity ; though they probably have a shrewd guess," he went on explaining gently.

"A pseudonym !" Petronella grasped at that. "Do I know it? Have I read any of your books !"

"Perhaps—yes, I think I have heard you say as much." He laughed a little. "I chose out fragments of my rather unwieldy name—and I call myself Henry Wray."

"You—*you* are Henry Wray !"

If Petronella had been red before, she was white enough now. The name came from her lips in a sort of cry—the name that had, since her earliest girlhood, represented for her the brightest and most particular star in her literary heaven. She had bought his books one by one as they appeared ; she had studied them again and again ; she had read reviews and articles on them with the eager, humble devotion of the neophyte for the master. There came back to her, with an awful overwhelming humiliation, things that she had said in her ignorance to this very quiet parson : literary information that she had given, little knowledgeable airs that she had assumed. She

buried her face in her hands as if she could never look up again.

"Oh, if only I had known! The foolish, foolish things that I have told you about my wretched writing—the way I took it for granted that you knew nothing about that sort of thing! Oh, what must you have thought of me?"

"Do you want to know what I thought of you, Petronella?"

"And you really cared—you really could care all the time, in spite of my foolishness? Why, even all those years ago when we met first—I wish I could remember it!—I seem to have been a little conceited wretch, thinking myself an authoress!"

"There are few of us who don't write—with Scott for a model—at ten years old, I fancy."

"Scott? Was Scott my model, then?"

He nodded, smiling. But in Petronella's eyes there was dawning a curious retrospective look.

"You said—you said——" she was struggling for a recollection that had escaped her—"Sir Walter is bad to beat, isn't he?"

"Did I? I forget." He seemed suddenly uneasy.

"But I am remembering!" Petronella cried. "That seems to have brought it back to me—in little bits. You were asleep in the grass—with such dusty boots! I had come away from Sarah

and Milly, because I wanted to write—in a black notebook——”

“Don’t worry yourself about it,” he said, with a sudden eager earnestness. “What does it matter?”

“But it *is* coming back!” cried Petronella, holding her forehead, and staring at him with eyes that were growing frightened. “I read you whatever foolishness I had written; and then—and then—you told me a story——”

“What if I did? It is not worth trying to remember—you are only worrying yourself for nothing!”

But Petronella pushed him away with frenzied hands; and the fright and doubt in her eyes were rapidly becoming a certainty of terror.

“I do remember—I am sure!” she cried. “You did tell me a story—and that was what I wrote afterwards, and called *Angela Trevor*!”

“What if it was? You were welcome to it!” he returned hastily. “Fortunately I had never used it——”

“But you would have used it, in time—if I had not stolen it from you?”

He made reluctant confession. “Perhaps—I can’t tell. The plot had been in my head for a great many years; but I could never satisfy myself about the end.”

“The end?” Petronella looked up through bitter tears. “Ah, the end *was* mine, then! and

that and the characters were what everyone condemned as the weak parts of the book. The plot was its only saving grace—the plot that I thought I had invented long ago—and that was yours! I have been nothing but a fraud and a sham all this time!”

“It was not with a fraud or a sham—or even with an authoress—that I fell in love,” said Vecqueray : in such a very quiet voice, that perhaps Petronella would not have heard what he said if he had not been extremely close to her.

The constitutional optimist is sometimes justified of his optimism : and such proved to be the case with Wilfred Emery. For a certain friend of his in Devonshire, falling into rather indifferent health, and at the same time inheriting a modest fortune, suggested a partnership on such generous terms that Milly and Wilfred shook the dust of the town off their feet with all convenient speed, and flew joyfully to settle down in an old rambling house with a vast garden in the depths of the country. There Milly's weary perambulator trudges became a faintly disagreeable memory of the past. There Binkie and Mungo and Kissie, and others, their successors, all with mighty fine names and very undignified aliases, learnt the joys of entire freedom and perfect independence, and grew up strong and bonny. And there Petronella's John and Helen and Henry (who were never

called by any diminutives at all) came to spend long holidays, with ever so slight an envy of their country cousins. And if they were so lucky as to bring Aunt Sarah with them, then everyone had the best fun of all. For not only the old house and the garden and the moors were at their service, with ever new delights to unfold, but a stone's-throw away from the gate was the fascinating farm where Grandmamma flourished exceedingly, making (it was firmly believed) the best butter in all the world.

But to one and all of the children it would have been a source of measureless astonishment to learn that Mother (or, as the case might be, Aunt Nella) had ever written a book ; for the six author's copies of *Angela Trevor* had vanished, to all seeming, from the face of the earth.

THE END

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